



## **Fr. Francis R. Wolfram, SDB**

Born: March 18, 1932

Professed: September 8, 1951

Ordained: June 29, 1962

Died: January 25, 2012

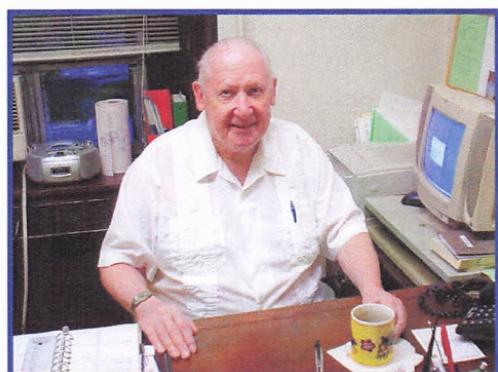
Cover photo by Fr. Michael Mendl

# FATHER FRANK WOLFRAM, SDB (1932-2012)

At 6:00 p.m. on January 25, 2012, Father Francis “Frank” Raymond Wolfram, SDB, completed the surrender of himself to God that began on the day of his Baptism, April 10, 1932, was intensified by his religious profession on September 8, 1951, and was perfected in the crucible of a long bout with cancer.

Father Frank surrendered his soul into the Father’s hands at Calvary Hospital in the Bronx, New York. He was 79 years old and had been

a Salesian of Don Bosco for more than 60 years and a priest for almost 50 years. He was a member of the provincial residence community in New Rochelle, New York, and secretary of the New Rochelle Province from September 2004 until his death.



*Fr. Frank as province secretary in 2007*

The cancer was first diagnosed in the summer of 2005 during a colon screening. After initial treatment (surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation) that seemed to be successful, Father Frank made a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico to seek her intercession for a return to health—a prayer that was granted for about four years as he resumed his offices of director of the provincial residence and province secretary. But the cancer recurred in May 2011, resulting in a major operation, a long hospitalization, and no recovery of his customary vitality after he returned home in August. In mid-December he returned to Sound Shore Medical Center in New Rochelle, and at the beginning of January he entered hospice care at Calvary.

## **The Beginning of a Vocation**

Frank Wolfram, son of Frederick and Catherine née Patrick Wolfram, was born on March 18, 1932, in Riverside, New Jersey, where the family belonged to Saint Peter’s Church. Frank was baptized there, and also

confirmed there at age 11. He attended Saint Peter's Elementary School in Riverside for eight years.

From his boyhood Frank wanted to be a priest, his brother Michael recalls. He used to play "saying Mass" and would have Mike serve for him. Mike was honored when he was able to serve Father Frank's "real" Mass after his return from theological studies and ordination in Germany.

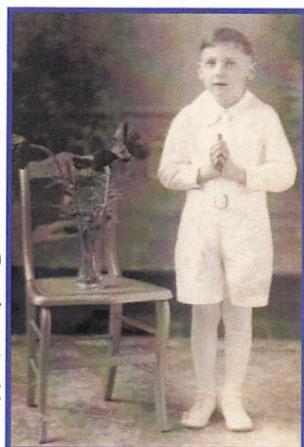
Mike also remembers other traits that Frank displayed early: teaching ability, leadership, and energy. "He loved teaching and as a child used to play school where he was the teacher. Our dad bought us an army set where there were ranks in the army. Frank always wanted to be the general and his brother had to be the private." He and Mike spent one summer working on a farm, ten hours a day Monday through Saturday—for the princely wages of \$16 a week, half of which Frank gave to his parents to help with school expenses, clothing, etc.

Father Frank remained close to his family all his life. He looked forward to visiting them for vacation, to traveling with his sister Marge, to baptizing or witnessing the marriages of multiple nephews and nieces and grandnephews and grandnieces. When the press of work didn't allow week-long vacations, he'd slip away to visit Marge in New Jersey for two or three days several times a year (and return to report gleefully that gas in central New Jersey was 50¢ a gallon less than in New York).

He was interested in the arts as a youngster. His best friend Raymond Horan took piano lessons. The teacher wouldn't let Frank be present because he'd distract the student. But he'd listen outside. When he finally got the chance to learn to play the organ in the seminary, he seized the opportunity. Among Father Frank's papers is a three-page review of "Don Bosco and Music" dated November 22, 1953.

As for Raymond Horan, he remained Frank's friend, piano-lesson exclusion notwithstanding; in fact, Frank took Raymond as his confirmation name because of their friendship.

Frank also liked to draw and was pretty good at it even without formal lessons. A picture he drew of Saint Aloysius Gonzaga was framed and hung in Saint Peter's sacristy by one of the nuns of the parish school,



*Frank's First*

*Communion portrait*

and it remained there for years, Mike Wolfram attests. In later years art always enhanced the programs that Father Frank designed for school or liturgical use.

At Camden Catholic High School he was involved in dramatics and had the lead role in the school play (*Rio Rita*) when he was a senior. Years later Father Frank listed his dramatic appearances in his curriculum vitae, starting with high school and

running through his theology years. As a school administrator he strongly promoted both music and dramatics in the curriculum.

To pursue the priesthood toward which he was so inclined, for ninth grade he went off to the minor seminary of the Franciscans who staffed Saint Peter's Church. But the Franciscans weren't for him, and he was back home in a month. (Years later he would often say that he hadn't known there was any other kind of priest.) It was at that point that he enrolled in Camden Catholic.

While he was a junior at Camden Catholic, he had what was truly a chance encounter with Don Bosco. As he told the story, he was walking near home one day when the wind blew a piece of paper against his leg. He picked it up and discovered a Salesian vocation flyer, "The Voice of Don Bosco." He responded to it and received a personal reply from the vocation director at Don Bosco College in Newton, New Jersey. That personal reply led to a visit to Saint Michael's, the Salesian elementary school in Goshen, New York, in 1948, where Father Joseph Stella, one of the staff, made a deep impression on him.

Frank was so fascinated by Don Bosco, recalls his brother Mike, that he "started a group called the 'Sons of Don Bosco.' His friends were part of that group where he taught them about Don Bosco and the Salesians through a book by F.A. Forbes called *Don Bosco*. He bought several copies and sold them for 50¢ each." That fascination lasted a lifetime, and one of Father Frank's joys was to share it with young Salesians, novices, and candidates in formal classes, preaching, and friendly conversation.



*An undated picture of Bro. Frank playing the organ*

Margaret Picklo

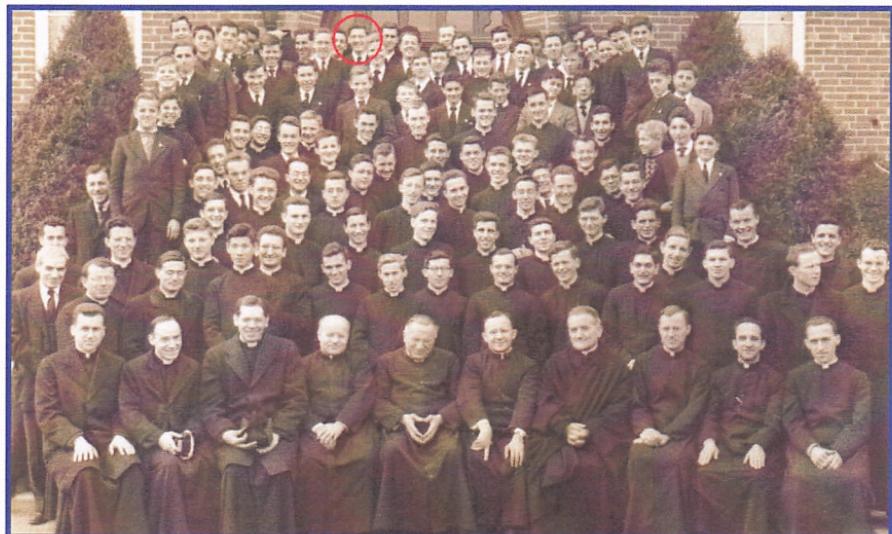


Upon his graduation from Camden Catholic in May 1949, Frank applied to Don Bosco Seminary, visiting the seminary to present his papers. His principal, Sister Mary Mangan, RSM,\* recommended him to Father Stella, who had become the seminary prefect (treasurer), as “a conscientious student with a seriousness of purpose and a fine sense of responsibility ... a boy of high standards and ideals.” Saint Peter’s pastor, Father Raymond Werdge, OFM Conv., seconded the principal’s opinion: “Francis Wolfram is an excellent Catholic young man...industrious, honest, and faithful.”

*Frank's portrait as a senior  
at Camden Catholic*

### Salesian Formation

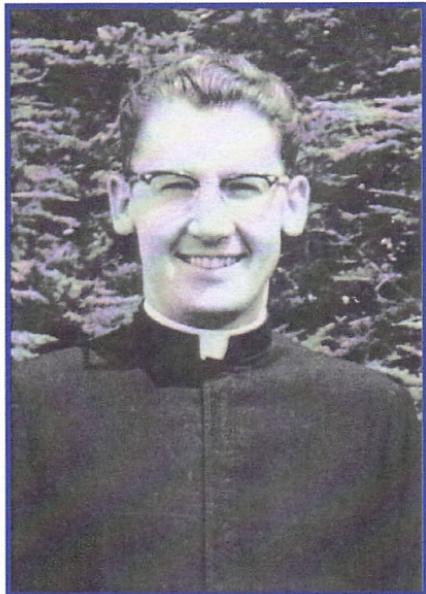
Frank entered the seminary in September 1949 as a Son of Mary, undertaking preliminary academic work, e.g., in Latin, and being introduced more intensely to Saint John Bosco and the Salesian charism.



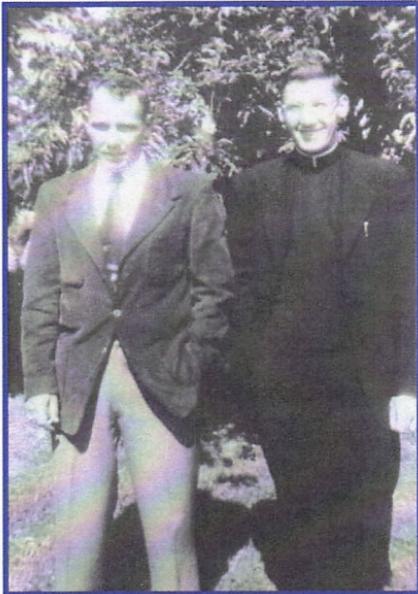
Province Archives

*In this photo of the Don Bosco College Seminary community from 1949-1950, Son of Mary Frank Wolfram is in the back row a little to the left of center.*

\* Thanks to Sr. Elizabeth O’Hara, RSM, archivist of the Sisters of Mercy in Watchung, N.J., for supplying Sr. Mary’s surname (Jan. 3, 2013).



*Bro. Frank in Newton*



*Bro. Frank with his brother Joseph*

Margaret Picklo

He was admitted to Saint Joseph's Novitiate, on the same seminary campus, the following year. In his letter of application, May 24, 1950, he stated: "I believe that this congregation is the place where God wills me to be," and "I desire to be a priest, to save my own soul and the souls of others, especially those of youth." The remaining 62 years his life bore witness that he was, indeed, where God wanted him to be, and his zeal for souls never slackened.

His master of novices was Father Attilio Giovannini. His classmates included two future provincials, Salvatore Isgro and Harry Rasmussen, and some men who went on to notable Salesian careers: James Jeffcoat, Andrew LaCombe, and Alfred Rinaldi. Frank began his preaching career in May 1951 with a sermonette entitled "Mary, Queen of Apostles." He made his first profession of vows on September 8, 1951, and became Brother Frank Wolfram.

At Don Bosco College Brother Frank was much involved not only in serious academic pursuits but also in dramatics, continuing the avocation he'd fostered in high school and would foster as an educator. After his graduation (magna cum laude) in 1954, he did his practical training as a teacher at Salesian High School in New Rochelle (1954-1956), Don Bosco Prep High School in Ramsey, New Jersey (1956-1957), and Don Bosco Technical High School in Paterson, New Jersey (1957-1958).



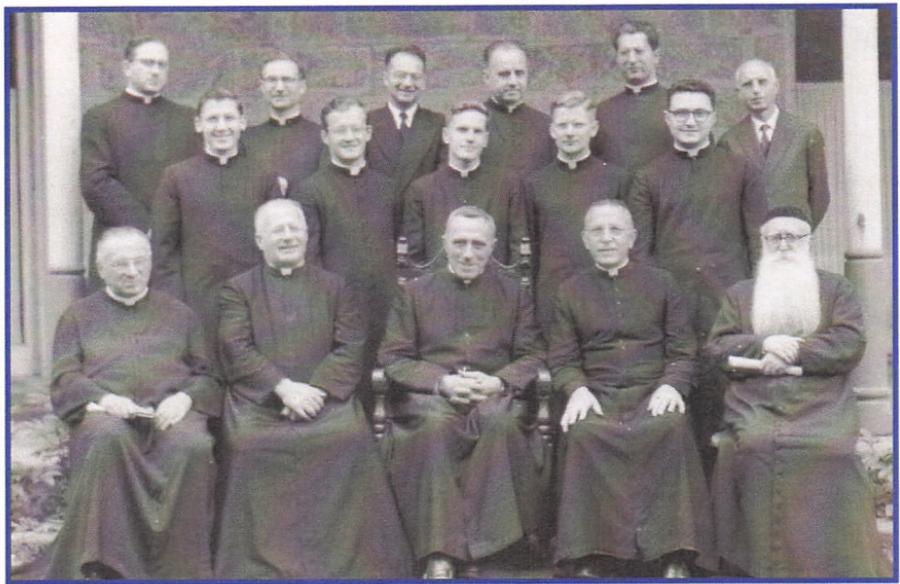
*The seminarians from Newton assisted the province's vocation director (at left) in leading weekend retreats for seventh and eighth graders at Don Bosco Juniorate in Haverstraw. This 1954 photo shows Bro. Frank at the right.*



*Bro. Jim Jeffcoat and Bro. Frank Wolfram at Newton's grotto in June 1954*

As a seminarian and practical trainee, Brother Frank was noted for his studiousness and piety, and also for a forthrightness that superiors sometimes took for excessive criticism—to the extent that his application for perpetual vows in 1957 was denied, and he renewed his temporary vows for one year.

He worked constantly as a seminarian, a priest, and a senior confrere to overcome the defects that he saw in himself, including that sometimes too critical spirit and the teasing of confreres that might go too far. Father Frank's readiness to "call a spade a spade"



Province Archives

During his visit to the U.S. in June 1955, Fr. Renato Ziggotti, the Rector Major (front, center), posed with the members of the New Rochelle community, including Fr. Ernest Giovannini (front, 2d from left), provincial, and Fr. Celestine Moskal (front, 2d from right), director. Bro. Frank Wolfram is at the left end of the 2d row. (Until 1960 there was just one New Rochelle community, serving both the high school and the province offices.)

remained characteristic all his Salesian life, and it earned him a great deal of respect from confreres, faculty, students, diocesan administrators, and others. Those who came to know him well recognized his teasing as a sign of real affection, e.g., greeting confreres with “So-and-so, you’re looking good! Who’s your undertaker?” or “Well, if it isn’t Michael the Dark Angel!” or nicknaming a certain ever-so-proper priest at Don Bosco College who played trumpet “Hot Lips Justen.”

Brother Frank was admitted to perpetual profession in 1958 with the observations of the superiors in Paterson that he showed “good piety” and “clerical spirit” and an “excellent spirit of work,” and he was a “good, conscientious teacher” and a “conscientious assistant.”

Brother Frank began his theological studies at the Salesians’ Theologate of Saint Thomas Aquinas in Aptos, California, in 1958. During his two years at Aptos, he collaborated with two other students of theology, Brothers Marcel Savard and James Jeffcoat, to write a *History and Theology of the Mass*, and he also developed a personal interest in the many Salesian saints and servants of God. The liturgy

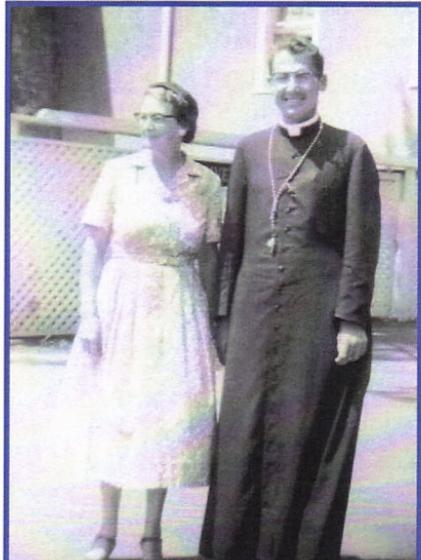


*In March 1960 Fr. Ziggiotti was in the U.S. again. Here he poses with the faculty and students of Aptos. Bro. Frank is 3d from the left in the 3d row.*



*Behind the flag, Bro. Frank directs a camp program, possibly at Camp Don Bosco in Newton*

When the Aptos theologate was closed in 1960, Brother Frank was only halfway through the program of studies. According to his telling of the story, Father Felix Penna, the provincial, assigned the theology



*Bro. Frank with his mother at summer camp in Goshen in 1960*

and Salesian saints would figure prominently in his future priestly and formation ministry.



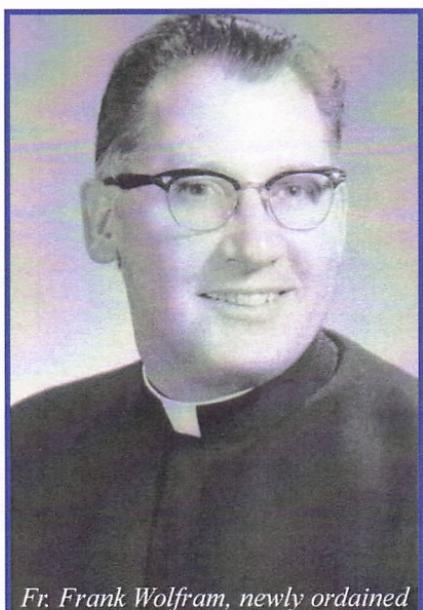
*Bro. Frank with an unidentified priest at Benediktbeuern*

so designated him for the Salesians' Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule at Benediktbeuern, Germany. In fact, Brother Frank didn't know a word of German. He was, moreover, the only English-speaking student at Benediktbeuern and had to learn the language by immersion. His knowledge of German later proved useful not only for teaching it at the high school level but also for preaching, confessions, and other ministry at the German and Austrian consulates in New York City.

At Benediktbeuern Brother Frank proved to be a valuable liaison with U.S. soldiers stationed at Bad Tölz, obtaining their help, for instance, in getting a basketball court built for the theologians. He, in turn, offered them lectures on the art of the Benediktbeuern monastery, parts of which date to the eighth century (it was founded by Saint Boniface). Years later, Father Frank enjoyed telling the story of his first encounter with the soldiers, who admired his mastery of English and wondered where he had learned it.

At Benediktbeuern, Father Frank earned a master's degree in theology and was ordained on June 29, 1962, by Bishop Josef Freundorfer

students of the New Rochelle Province to their new schools without asking them about their personal preferences. Seeing Brother Frank's German surname, he assumed that he knew some German and

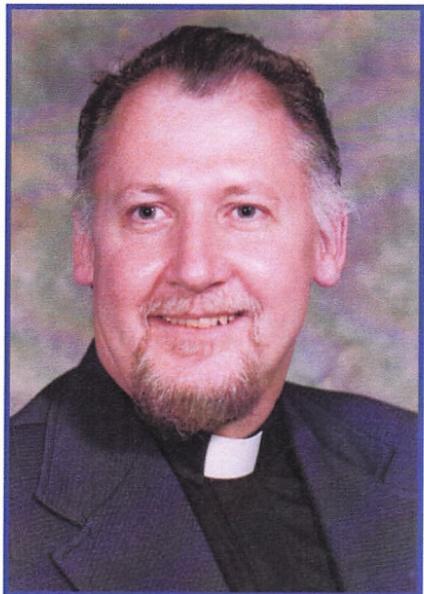


*Fr. Frank Wolfram, newly ordained*

of Augsburg. He took a priestly motto from Saint Paul: “I became a minister of the Church through the commission God gave me to preach among you his word in all its fullness” (Colossians 1:25). Former provincial Father James Heuser, preaching at Father Frank’s funeral, called that “a plan of life centered on God’s Word” and demonstrated in the homily his faithfulness to that plan in word, deed, and silence.

### Salesian Educational Ministry

Most of Father Frank’s priestly life was spent in the province’s schools: Salesian High School in New Rochelle (teacher and catechist 1962-1964, vice principal and principal 1966-1973, director 1978-1980), Don Bosco Technical High School in Boston (dean of students 1964-1966), Saint Dominic Savio High School in East Boston (teacher 1973-1974), Archbishop Shaw High School in Marrero, Louisiana (principal



*In the early and mid-1970s Fr. Frank sported a stylish goatee*

Province Communications Office



*As principal of Archbishop Shaw High School, Fr. Frank offers the invocation during an the annual NJROTC ball at Algiers Naval Air Station, in the mid-1970s. Next to him is Lcdr. Hillary Parrish, Shaw's naval science instructor.*

Province Communications Office

1974-1978), LaSalle High School in Miami (principal 1985-1990), Don Bosco Technical High School in Paterson (teacher 1990-1991), and Mary Help of Christians School in Tampa (director 1994-1997). He was a skilled teacher of religion, English, German, and world history at all levels of high school.

While he was principal in New Rochelle, Salesian High reached its peak enrollment of 567 boys, and Father Frank also noted with pride that, unlike some other Catholic schools in the area, Salesian never had to close because of student unrest in the late 1960s. He maintained relationships with many of the alumni for years, which he happily refreshed annually at the President's Dinners. He took pleasure while he was at the provincial house in looking after "Diego's Boys"—the young men who had once been members of Father Diego Borgatello's informal "oratory" at the provincial residence, many of whom had also attended Salesian High School.

The impact he had on many young lives is indicated to some degree by comments made after his death.

Tom Husted, Salesian High School Class of 1973, wrote: "Great man, educator, and priest. Central figure of my high school years."

From Joanne and Cesar Selema, Class of 1972: "A great friend and mentor. For the past 35 years Father Frank was an integral part of our family. We will remember him for his friendship, graciousness, warmth and intelligence."

Anna and Thomas Ralph, Class of 1975, wrote: "Father Frank, you have earned your heavenly reward and now you are reunited with God our Father. Our memories of you will last forever and fill us with joy each time we think of you. You were my principal at Salesian HS in the early 70's. We were honored when you married us in 1980 in the Iona College Chapel. You were there for us whenever we needed your support, most recently when my dad passed away and you celebrated his funeral Mass in 2008."

Sometimes in his younger years Father Frank stretched the limits of Don Bosco's methods, as Salesian alumnus Bill Gallagher remembered: "We would always be a little 'daring' coming back from summer vacation. The hoop team would just be getting back from Jersey in late August with Brother Jim [Wiegand] and our sideburns were long and some of us would attempt mustaches. I was never too successful with either. We all knew how we were supposed to look but some of us had to push the envelope. We would try to sneak by Father Frank and Father

John [Masiello] and then we would get ‘the finger’ from Father Frank. EVERYBODY would look!! He would grab both sideburns, twist and twist and twist, and sprinkle them to the floor. But, in the end, the lessons and discipline we learned from Father Frank and the other Salesians, as well as [the lay faculty], have served us well. Nothing but the fondest memories!! He sure kept us on the straight and narrow, which is something most of us certainly needed.”

In a similar vein, Doctor David Valauri, Class of 1971, wrote: “I have fond memories of seeing multiple body parts of my fellow students on the floor surrounding Fr. Frank. A disciplinarian with a big heart. We will miss him!”

Numerous alumni summed him up as “tough but fair,” adding, “He touched all of our lives in a very positive way!” Many also noted his “great sense of humor,” and many likewise counted him as their best or their favorite teacher.

Such thoughts, minus the “physical discipline,” were echoed also in Miami by alumni of LaSalle High School. One example comes from C. Corchuelo: “Father Frank, thank you for your friendship and advice during my years at La Salle. I still smile thinking of our long conversations, and I know I am one of many students who are truly blessed to have met you. May you rest in peace.” And from Gil Gonzalez: “Thank you for the guidance you provided as my principal at La Salle High School. You made such a positive impact on the lives of so many students, and you will surely be missed.”

## Master of the Preventive System

During Father Frank’s directorship of Salesian High, Father William Keane was principal. He observes that Father Frank’s “fairness and love for the teachers as well as the students made my task that much easier. You could tell that he loved to teach. His students loved him and many returned to wish him well and recall the ‘old days.’ Some of the guys who at times found themselves in trouble were probably his best admirers. He knew when to set them straight.”

The current principal of Salesian High, John Flaherty, pays tribute to Father Frank as his mentor: “I had the great fortune of starting my teaching career when Fr. Frank was the prefect of studies in the ’60s. He was the man in full control of every aspect of school life. His energy was boundless, and he seemed to be everywhere at the same time. He shepherded his flock of young men intensely, and many of them have

remained life-long friends. How fortunate I was that he also found the time to mentor his young staff. The blueprint he provided for us helped us to get where we are today. Proudly, I continue many of the practices that Fr. Frank started so many years ago. His legacy has become our traditions at Salesian High School.”

Salesian High honored Father Frank thrice, in 1984 as its first honorary alumnus, in 2003 with its Distinguished Faculty Award, and in 2005 with the Saint Francis de Sales Award for Outstanding Service.

As a junior at Don Bosco Tech in Paterson in 1990-1991, Abraham Feliciano, now a Salesian priest, had Father Frank as his theology teacher. He writes: “He...was one of my favorite teachers. He really ignited in us [the students] a greater love for Jesus, the Paschal Mystery and the continued presence of Christ among us.”

Having earned a master’s degree in educational administration and supervision (with distinction) at Boston College (1975), Father Frank served as the province’s superintendent of schools from 1979 to 1985. He also served on the provincial council in those years. During the consultation conducted by the provincial regarding potential councilors, Father Frank was described by the confreres as “experienced, knowledgeable, balanced, competent in the area of education, effective,” and in 1982 the provincial, Father Dominic DeBlase, found him “well organized, good administrator, [possessing a] high degree of educational expertise, respected by confreres for his educational ability and experience.”

He took additional courses in education at Fordham and Tulane universities. His practical ability as teacher and supervisor of instruction is indicated also by his having earned certifications in Florida, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York based on both his education and his experience.

Father Frank told Father Steve Shafran that the Preventive System was part of who he was. “The Preventive System is our spirituality; it’s the way we have to live.”

Part of his living the Preventive System was his capacity for friendship. Some of his former students have already been quoted to that effect.

The present writer got to know Father Frank during the 1973-1974 school year at Saint Dominic Savio High School. Father Frank had just left Salesian High after seven years as prefect of studies (vice principal) and principal, while I was in my third year of practical training and first

as dean of freshmen. As a teacher of freshman religion and history, he was formally “under” a young and pretty green educator, but he was encouraging and never put forward his vastly superior experience, e.g. in staff meetings, without its being sought. He didn’t say so, but I suspect he also recognized someone with a character and experience much like his own. It was the beginning of a friendship and a mentoring that lasted till his death.

In his funeral homily Father Jim Heuser also testified to such friendship. “When he came [as provincial secretary], I knew that I was getting a hard worker, one who was organized and who would restructure the office. What I did not know was that I was getting a friend” who “studied me, got to know me, understood me, and grasped the manner in which I worked” so that he was able to anticipate the provincial’s needs and “manifest innumerable kindnesses to make my work easier.”

So well did Father Frank get to know Father Jim that he would predict who would be appointed as directors; he also became very good at predicting how individual members of the council would vote on various questions. Such attention and attentiveness to others “was the way he related to so many,” said Father Jim: to “family members, students, spiritual directees, Salesian confreres, and more. He kept in



*As outgoing director, Fr. Frank was authorized to install Fr. George Hanna as director of the provincial residence in July 2008; here he administers the profession of faith.*

touch by correspondence and by telephone. And he was sought out repeatedly for weddings, Baptisms, and funerals by former students who'd become his friends."

Such friendship and counsel exemplified how he preached God's loving Word in his deeds and personal relationships.

## **Troubleshooter**

Father Frank's own curriculum vitae refers to his role as a "troubleshooter" when he was assigned to Salesian High School in 1966 because of the school's "low enrollment" and "weak program." He beefed up the academic program and, as noted above, brought enrollment up to a still unmatched historic peak.

A long letter from Alvin L. Murphy, associate superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of New Orleans, to Father Salvatore Isgro, the provincial, in 1976 testifies that Father Frank was "an outstanding administrator" who had "given a new and exciting direction to Archbishop Shaw High School," enabling the school to make "great strides academically." After noting many particulars concerning both students and faculty, Mr. Murphy wrote, "We...appreciate your assigning a man of such a caliber to Archbishop Shaw High School and we want to assure you that we could not be more pleased with Father Frank."

The background for that was difficult and complicated. In Father Frank's own words, he was sent as principal of the archdiocesan-owned, Salesian-administered school in 1974 as a "trouble shooter: province & archdiocese suggest SDBs leave: poor teachers, low morale, SDB in-house squabbles." He "fired incompetent & anti-Catholic teachers, set academic & disciplinary standards."

Father Frank's peers within the New Orleans Archdiocese, too, recognized his abilities, choosing him to serve a term as chairman of the Catholic Secondary Principals Association. He also belonged to the Archdiocesan Administrators Workshop and the Archdiocesan Finance Committee and served on the steering committee for the Archdiocesan Youth Rally at the Superdome in 1977. The Louisiana State Senate made him an honorary senator in 1976.

From Marrero Father Frank was called back to Salesian High School in New Rochelle in 1978 to serve as director. The local newspaper, the *Standard-Star*, on August 10 quoted him: "I really feel like I'm coming home. I know 20 years of alumni of the school, many parents of Salesian's students, as well as most of the pastors of the Catholic

churches in the area. I also count most of the members of the lay faculty among my friends; I taught many of them and hired most of them. So I am looking forward to some successful years during my three-year term of office. Of course, that will depend on the close cooperation of the students, parents and faculty at Salesian. And I know the cooperation will be there.”

James Toolan, assistant principal, commented to the same newspaper: “I’m very happy to see Father Frank return to Salesian. Under his spiritual and educational leadership, we will see a rejuvenation of Salesian High School.”

Both Father Frank’s and Mr. Toolan’s were optimistic views of another challenging situation—again as reported in the *Standard-Star*: “The lay teachers at the school have been attempting to unionize since last winter, and plan a mail ballot election in September. The school has refused to recognize the union.” The paper also noted that a whole new Salesian administration had been brought in with Father Frank: Father William Keane as principal; Father Edmund Burke as treasurer; and Father Roy Shelly as dean of religious activities.

Father Frank’s own notes add that there was “no SDB-teacher communication.” But the combined efforts of the new administration were successful in calming the situation, rebuilding school and faculty spirit, and inducing the faculty to reject unionization. After only two years as director Father Frank would be transferred to the provincial house community and give his full attention to superintending all the province’s schools.

Father Frank was the first Salesian principal of the archdiocese of Miami’s LaSalle High School when the province agreed to take over its administration in 1985. It presented a different set of challenges as a co-ed school formerly run by a lay administration—not just co-ed, but with far more girls than boys, and with a predominantly Cuban-American population (at the time all the other schools in the U.S. part of the province were overwhelmingly “Anglo,” calling for some cultural adjustments on the part of the Salesian staff). Led by Father Frank, the Salesians quickly brought a Salesian style and spirit to the staff and students and deepened the school’s spiritual and sacramental life.

## **Formation Guide**

Father Steve Shafran holds a doctorate in education and is president of Don Bosco Cristo Rey High School in Takoma Park, Maryland. Grateful for all that he learned from Father Frank, he writes: “I have

been blessed to have had Frank Wolfram as a mentor and example, especially of Salesian education at different times in my Salesian life. His hardworking ethic, German precision and love for the Preventive System have been among some of the great qualities that come to mind. I was struck by how much he loved music, theater and literature, and it was from him that I learned more of Don Bosco's love of the arts."

Father Steve notes further that Father Frank sought a balance between the rapport demanded by Don Bosco's educational approach and "the importance of the educator's strong preparation and lesson planning for classes." In his own teaching experience, Father Shafran found success from "borrowing" from Father Frank's "excellent notes and lessons plans."

Father Frank was director of the provincial residence in New Rochelle twice (1982-1985, 2005-2008) and of the Salesian Center in Columbus, Ohio (1991-1994),

where he guided the students of theology, their pastoral ministries, and the Salesian Boys & Girls Club. When he was nominated as director on several occasions, provincials pointed to such qualities as his "Salesian depth," the respect



Fr. Dennis Donovan

*Fr. Frank loved a good time. As director of the students of theology in Columbus, he became Brunhilde for some festivity; we don't know whether he sang. With him are Fr. Bill Bucciferro and Fr. Roy Shelly.*

that he commanded

among the confreres, his "balance and good spirit," and his potential for providing initial or ongoing formation.

His service in the field of Salesian formation also included preaching retreats to novices and giving courses in Scripture, Salesian history, and Salesian education to novices and prenovices. He particularly enjoyed teaching the prenovices the life of Don Bosco, especially with the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, and teaching the novices the Preventive System—a course in which he brought to bear his long years of practical



*Fr. Frank loved to spend time with younger Salesians and candidates. Here he's speaking with then-Bro. Mike Leschinsky at a Memorial Day cookout at the provincial house in 2005.*

experience and for which he had the students, for example, review and evaluate the student handbooks of the various schools of the province.

Father Feliciano recalls beginning his novitiate (1997-1998) with one of Father Frank's retreats: "It remains to this day one of the best retreats I've ever experienced in my Salesian life, and was a constant point of reference throughout my novitiate year."

A member of the Don Bosco Volunteers secular institute wrote, "How I love the retreats that he gave us—down-to-earth, clear, full of spiritual gems that surely helped us to understand and live better our way of life as consecrated seculars."

As a novice in 2008-2009, Brother Paul Chu found Father Frank to be "a great teacher.... I enjoyed listening to his teachings on the Preventive System. He was kind, gentle, and always attentive to our needs."

At one period Father Frank chaired the province's Formation Commission. Brother Thomas Sweeney served with him and paints a vintage portrait of him: "His meetings were very precise, well organized and right to the point. You knew he did his homework in preparing the necessary information and materials so that when a decision had to be

made, you had all the necessary info to make the right decision. He always took the meetings very seriously and expected you to do the same. Though I do not care for meetings, I kind of looked forward to his because of his excellent organization and preparation.”

He took part in nine provincial chapters, either ex-officio or by election, between 1980 and 2007.

## Priest and Preacher

For seven years Father Frank preached adult retreats at Don Bosco Retreat Center in Haverstraw-Stony Point, New York (1997-2004), and until his final illness he remained a popular retreat preacher. He fielded constant requests for weekend or weeklong retreats from various congregations of sisters, parishes, and Salesian confreres. In fact, preaching retreats and parish missions was a staple of his long priestly ministry; the present writer first encountered him when he preached the mid-year retreat to the aspirants in Goshen in the winter of 1964.

“His Sunday homilies were crafted with care, pregnant with meaning. They were nourishing, and you were fed,” Father Heuser said. “And in various places, people would try to find out which Masses he was celebrating, so as to hear him break open God’s Word with grace and blessing.”

Anne Silo, a parishioner at Holy Name of Jesus in New Rochelle, succinctly affirms that: “When he was director at Salesian High School, [his] Mass at Holy Name was packed because he gave terrific homilies.”

He was “a superb homilist,” Claudia McDonnell, a parishioner of Saint Augustine in Larchmont, wrote in *Catholic New York* (March 24, 2011). She amplified that in a note after his death: “Father Frank was among the best homilists I’ve ever listened to. He always had a point to make or a message to convey, and he spoke in a way that made it easy to follow his line of thought. He went straight to the heart of the matter. Sometimes he used humor, sometimes he was very serious, but no matter what he said, he could hold a congregation’s attention in the palm of his hand. He always left you with something you could take away with you and think about. I’ll never forget the way he closed every homily, with a pause and then a quiet ‘May God bless you.’ He was an outstanding priest, and I doubt that anyone whose life he touched will ever forget him.”

More simply, Saint Augustine’s parishioner Gina Protano recalled: “I would always be very happy when I would go to Mass Saturday or

Sunday evening and find out that Fr. Frank was the celebrant. I liked his sermons so much!"

That homiletic style carried over to weekdays, as well, as former Salesian Missions employee Matt Welsh testifies: "I'll always remember his friendly presence and excellent homilies that he shared with us at the Mission Office."

Father Frank also "was an esteemed preacher of retreats—to Salesians, to novices, to other members of the Salesian Family, to religious, to lay people. He was frequently a preacher of parish missions. His conferences [as director of Salesian communities] were always solid and interesting, but more, they opened your heart to Christ," according to Father Heuser.

So rewarding was that preaching ministry that Father Frank found it hard to leave Don Bosco Retreat Center when Father Heuser called him to the provincial residence to become province secretary. But, as always, he obeyed readily, asking only that he be allowed to keep some preaching commitments that he had already made. In fact, during his seven years at

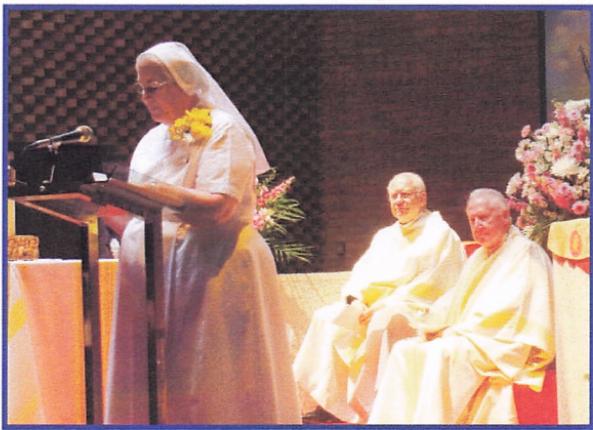
the provincial house he was able to continue giving occasional retreats and parish missions.

Father Frank's effectiveness in preaching the Word of God came in part from hard work and natural talent, from his knowledge of several languages, and from his experience in dramatics.



*Fr. Frank preaching a sisters' retreat at Don Bosco Retreat Center in Haverstraw in April 2000*

Province Archives



*Fr. Frank with Fr. Tom Dunne at the Salesian Sisters' jubilee celebration in North Haledon in July 2010.  
Sr. Mary Ann Zito is at the lectern.*

Fr. Michael Mendl

But the real secret, wrote Father Heuser, lay in his “daily personal encounter with the Word: Jesus Christ”—his daily meditation, his praying the Liturgy of the Hours, the time he gave every day to reflecting on the Scriptures for the coming Sunday.

Father Frank left this description: “I reflect on God’s call to me and the happiness that call has brought me. My journey as a priest has been filled with the magic of chasing God, sometimes catching Him, and then rushing back to tell others.”

As a spiritual director and confessor, he was a compassionate listener who was able to bring his broad experience to the assistance of penitents and counselees as he dispensed God’s mercy: lay people in parishes, religious sisters on retreats, Salesian confreres, and at least one provincial. Father Heuser spoke from personal experience about how Father Frank “listened with respectful attention, and then, with compassionate words, left you forgiven, healed, free.”

Father George Harkins’s “fondest memories of Fr. Frank will be his cheerfulness, his diligent devotion to duty and his ever-ready welcome which made you feel special.”

“Frank was a faithful, dedicated Salesian and priest and a wonderful man to have known,” Father David Moreno said.

Throughout his priestly years he enjoyed assisting in local parishes on weekends. Among them he listed Holy Name of Jesus in New Rochelle; Saint Boniface in Wesley Hills, New York; Saint Augustine in Larchmont, New York; Saint Michael in Greenwich, Connecticut; Saint Agnes in Key Biscayne, Florida; Saint Anthony in Columbus; and Saint Mary in Tampa.

He took great care to celebrate the liturgy as Don Bosco insisted it be done, *pie, devote, attente* (“fervently, devoutly, attentively”—see BM 7:317), which parishioners, Salesians, and other religious alike very much appreciated. One of his last contributions to community life at the provincial house was a series of talks on the upcoming revised Roman Missal—a series that he never completed.

Another aspect of his love for the liturgy was his preparation of numerous booklets for the celebration of various feasts—solemnities of the universal Church, American holidays, and Salesian feasts and memorials—celebrating Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours, and novenas with Scriptural texts, music, and selected readings from the *Biographical Memoirs*, the letters of the Rectors Major, and other sources. He composed the words to a number of hymns for these booklets when he couldn’t find texts that suited him, and he created general intercessions



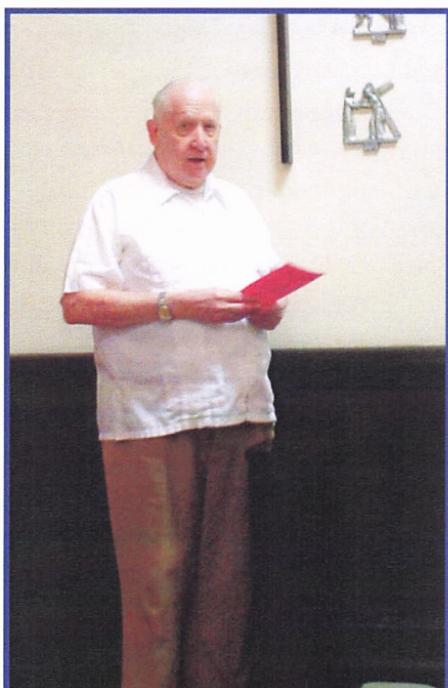
*As director of the provincial residence, Fr. Frank made sure that Fr. Bob Savage (in chasuble) had a joyful and well planned celebration of his 90th birthday in January 2007. Fr. Lou Molinelli (2d from right) preached, and Fr. Dominic Tran (far right) was master of ceremonies.*

for many occasions that were more particular than those in the official books. These various prayer services, said Father Heuser, “were designed to help us get to know our holy ones and to say, ‘If they could be holy, why not I?’”

### **Secretarial Efficiency**

Father Frank was very reluctant to leave the retreat house at Haverstraw and move to New Rochelle in September 2004. But, typically, he put heart and soul into his new responsibility as province secretary.

Some of the tasks of his work were nothing new: taking minutes, organizing files, handling mail and phone calls. Others were new: he had to become a notary public; he had to take a workshop in managing religious archives and guide those who directly looked after the province archives; he



Fr. Michael Mendl

*Fr. Frank leads a Christmas prayer service for the provincial house staff in December 2007*

had to learn the working styles of two provincials; he had to correspond with bishops and chanceries across the country and with provincials and confreres around the Salesian world, as well as with the Salesian major superiors and general offices in Rome.

Father Frank was always an early riser. That was a useful trait for the secretary since Europe in general and Rome in particular is six hours ahead of the Eastern time zone. So he'd be in his office by 6:00 a.m. to check for faxes and e-mails, to forward them where they needed to go or to answer them, as the case might be, before joining the community for prayer at 7:15. He would lay out material for the provincial according to the priorities he had learned from either Father Heuser or Father Thomas Dunne.

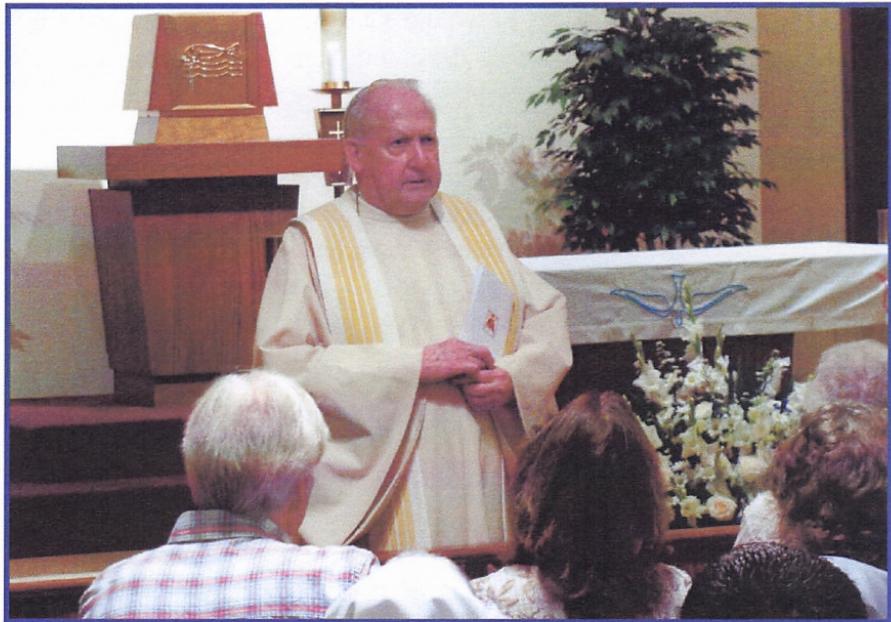
His language skills often had to be called upon—not German very much, but very often Italian and Spanish and occasionally Latin. He developed close working relationships with Fr. Stempel, the general secretary and various province secretaries such as Fr. Patrick Sherlock in Great Britain.

“Organization” could have been Father Frank’s middle name. He had a daily routine, of course, but in addition the various files in his office, the various supply closets, and the personnel files in their archive were



*Ever meticulous, the province secretary goes over profession documents with Fr. Steve Leake after then-Bro. Matt DeGance made his perpetual profession in Ramsey in August 2009.*

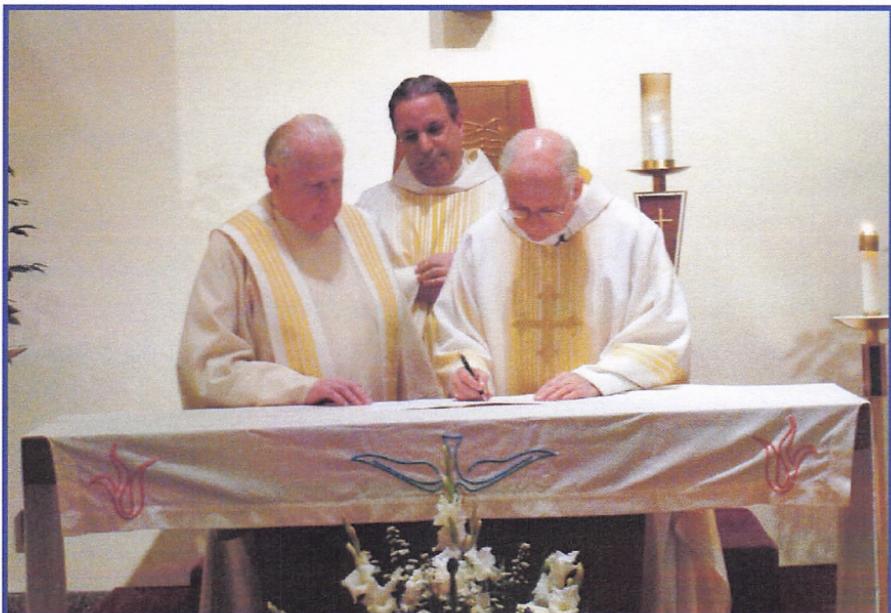
Fr. Michael Mendl



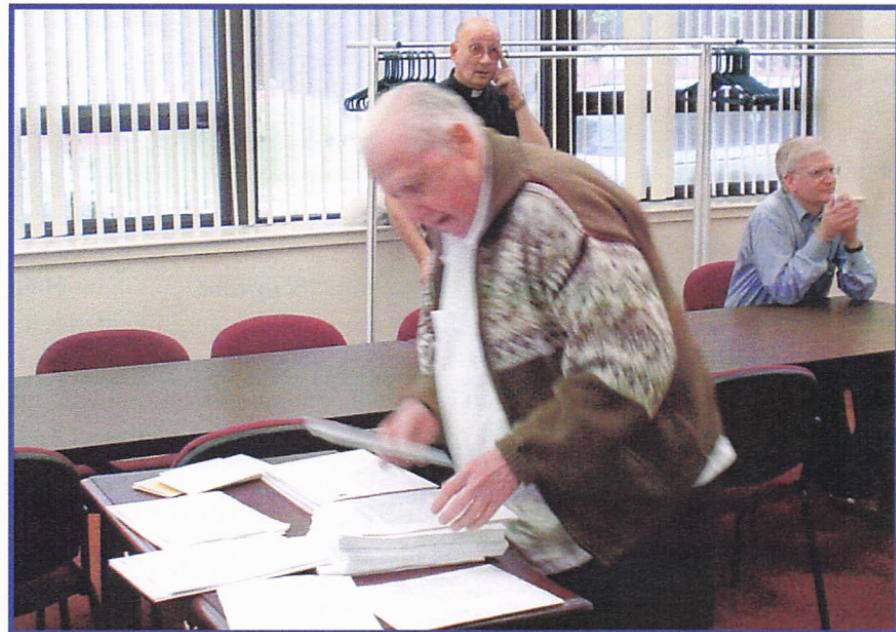
Fr. Michael Mendl

*(Above) The province secretary gives directions before the solemn Mass in which Fr. Tom Dunne was installed as provincial and the New Rochelle and Canada provinces were united, July 1, 2009, at Salesian High School.*

*(Below) Making sure the new provincial signs the document of his installation in the right place! Outgoing provincial Fr. Jim Heuser stands behind Fr. Frank and Fr. Tom Dunne.*



Fr. Michael Mendl



Fr. Michael Mendl

*Organization, thy name is Wolfram! Fr. Frank prepares copies of Fr. Joaquim D'Souza's final report for the directors at the end of the extraordinary visitation in May 2006.*

kept in meticulous order. If he was away or was busy elsewhere in the house and needed something, he could send a confrere exactly where the confrere needed to go to find the item and bring it to him.

One of the secretary's duties is to send material to the houses of the province: the annuario, DVDs from Turin, letters of the provincial, notifications of illness or death, etc. Father Frank quickly had all that down to a system—a system that sought economy as well as efficiency, for example distributing stacks of material at the fall and spring meetings of directors so that it wouldn't have to be mailed, and previewing DVDs to determine which ones were worth sending to the houses and which ones weren't worth the postage.

Inefficiency or neglect, on the other hand, exasperated him. For example, he couldn't understand how directors would fail to check and return page proofs of their entries in the province directory (a situation sure to be followed some months later by complaints about errors after the directory was published). One oft-told tale related to inefficiency concerned a query he had addressed to a certain congregational official; when the answer came, Father Frank lamented, "I had to read a page and a half of [name of foreign language], and all he said was 'no.'"

Father Frank labored for hours over reports: the annual updating of the province directory, through numerous drafts, and the annual statistical report for the secretary general in Rome. He'd have the latter done a week or so before it had to be sent (immediately on January 1) and would be terribly unhappy if, for instance, a confrere passed on to eternity in the waning days of the year, necessitating various changes in the report.

He made sure to have required documents ready: certificates of good conduct to go to various chanceries, profession and ordination documents in good order, letters of invitation to foreign confreres planning extended stays in the province (a requirement of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security)—and would be very much upset when some potential priest-student, for example, would be lackadaisical about forwarding the necessary papers for him to issue the invitation.

It was something of a joke in the house that Father Frank would have the provincial council minutes written before the meetings were held, including the outcomes of various votes that might be on the agenda. That wasn't literally true, of course, but he was well attuned to the views of the provincial and the individual councilors on the various matters that would be on their agenda, and the minutes were ready almost as soon as the monthly meeting finished.

The hours of daily secretarial work did not, however, prevent him from taking a full part in the community's daily prayer life and its priestly ministry. He loved to go to serve the Ursuline nuns, the Congregation of Notre Dame, and the Christian Brothers as well as Saint Augustine Parish. In addition, he looked forward each week to his class with the novices on Don Bosco's Preventive System. During the three years that he was director as well as secretary, he carefully prepared monthly conferences and Good Nights. He set aside time late each afternoon for serious reading, preparation for Mass, creating a new booklet for the Divine Office, etc. In the evening he would do more such personal work and then some light reading; he was a big fan of Harry Potter, for instance.

## Final Passage

Father Frank had a history of heart ailments, first evident in a heart attack in May 1990 while he was stationed in Miami. In later years there were four angioplasties, one catheterization, and, after another heart attack in December 1998, a quintuple bypass operation followed by two months in Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital in New York.

Then cancer was discovered during a colonoscopy in July 2005.

By the spring of 2011 Father Frank was looking forward to getting final clearance from his cancer doctor after five years of remission. From May 1 to 7 he took part in the meeting of provincial secretaries of the InterAmerica Region in Peru with Father Marian Stempel, the Salesian secretary general. But when he came home, he wasn't feeling well. Nevertheless, he carried on with his secretarial duties, weekly classes with the novices, and presentation of the new Missal to the community, and he gave a day of recollection in Ramsey on the 18th.

When he went to see his primary care doctor on the morning of May 27, appendicitis was the initial diagnosis, and he was rushed directly to Sound Shore Medical Center in New Rochelle. His director, Father Steven Dumais, spent most of the day with him in the emergency room before surgery in the afternoon, in which his appendix, part of his colon, and a large growth were removed. A subsequent biopsy showed the growth to be malignant.

He remained in the hospital and the adjacent physical therapy unit of Sound Shore until August 25, awaiting medical decisions and getting physical and occupational therapy. But his strength didn't return, he had no appetite, and his weight dropped drastically, so that follow-up surgery to undo a colostomy and close the initial surgical wound couldn't be carried out, nor could he start chemotherapy. In July he suffered an infection that required temporary transfer from the therapy unit back to the hospital.

Back home at the end of August, Father Frank worked in his office several hours a day, but at nothing like his normal pace. Despite home cooking, rest, a visiting nurse, continued therapy, and the attention of his confreres, there was little improvement in his physical condition. Although he never missed province celebrations—Province Day, jubilees, professions, ordinations, and funerals—he was unable to attend the province's annual jubilee celebration at the Marian Shrine on September 25, even though he was one of the jubilarians (60 years professed).

On October 21 he re-entered the hospital with another infection related to his surgical wound. By the 27th he was well enough to move to United Hebrew Nursing Home in New Rochelle for more physical therapy and attention to his diet. He came home again on November 10 and resumed light work in his office when he felt strong enough. On the evening of December 9 he wasn't well enough to take part in the annual gathering of "Diego's Boys," to his disappointment and theirs.

We don't know when Father Frank realized that he wasn't going to get better. There was no denial of the reality of death, no anger. He appreciated what confreres and others did for him, and let them know that. Occasionally his famous wit would surface in a wry comment or some teasing words. Despite pain and discomfort, the only word of complaint that he seems to have uttered concerned what he considered his doctor's lack of openness about the seriousness of his condition.

In his own typical fashion, he set about planning his own Mass of Christian Burial, choosing the readings, the hymns, and the homilist. His acceptance of impending death and the serenity with which he waited for it, even longed for it, was yet another way that he preached God's Word—in silence. It was also evidence that, almost 63 years after Sister Mary Mangan called him "a boy of high standards and ideals," he had remained true to those ideals.

On December 17 he left the provincial residence for the last time, going back to Sound Shore once more. More tests and procedures were carried out, leading to the conclusion that there was nothing further to be done for him. A medical consultation among Father Frank, Father Dumais, and the physicians led to a decision that he should enter hospice care, which he did at Calvary Hospital in the Bronx on January 7.

During these several hospitalizations, Father was visited almost daily, sometimes more than once, by confreres from his own provincial residence community and from nearby Salesian communities, by local clergy, by former students, and by parishioners from Holy Name of Jesus and Saint Augustine churches. In his final weeks at Calvary, he was accompanied for long hours almost every day by Joel Melford (Salesian High Class of 1969).

Long before the end came, Father Frank was ready, facing his last journey with a peaceful heart and mind. He seemed to have that same trust in God's boundless love that he had instilled in so many penitents over the years. In fact, in the last days at Calvary, he longed to pass to eternal life. A day or two before he died, he woke from slumber at one point, and was somewhat startled to see Father Dumais at the bedside. "I'm not dead yet?" he exclaimed, apparently disappointed.

Father Frank is survived by two sisters, Margaret Picklo of Delran, New Jersey, and Mary Bernadette Kavanaugh of Dallas, Texas; a brother, Michael of Moorestown, New Jersey; a sister-in-law, Mae Wolfram of Westmont, New Jersey; and numerous nieces, nephews, grandnieces, and grandnephews. Two brothers, Joseph and Anthony, died earlier.

Father Frank was waked in the chapel of Salesian High School on January 27. The Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated at Saint Augustine Church in Larchmont on January 28, attended by numerous confreres, other religious, Don Bosco Volunteers, and parishioners. Father Thomas Dunne, the provincial, presided. Father James Heuser, former provincial, gave the homily.

Father Frank was buried in the Salesian Cemetery in Goshen, New York, following the funeral Mass. There he and the confreres who preceded him lie in the shadow of a marble crucifix inscribed, *Hic quiescunt in pace Christi Salesianae Congregationis sodales resurrecturi*—“Here the confreres of the Salesian Congregation rest in Christ’s peace, awaiting the resurrection.”

Father Michael Mendl, SDB  
Vice Director  
Salesian Provincial Residence  
New Rochelle

## **Data for the Necrology**

### **Father Francis R. Wolfram, SDB**

Born March 18, 1932, Riverside, N.J.

Professed September 8, 1951,  
Newton, N.J.

Ordained June 29, 1962,  
Benediktbeuern, Germany

Died January 25, 2012, Bronx, N.Y.

Professed 60 years, 4 months, 17 days

Ordained 49 years, 6 months, 26 days

Aged 79 years, 10 months, 7 days

