

Dear Confrères,

On the 8th February, 1977, there occurred the death of a well-known figure in this province,

REV. FATHER HAROLD PATRICK BLEACH, S.D.B.

It is always sad to have to report the passing of any member of our Society, but the death of Father Bleach means the severance of a valued link with the earliest years of this province. It was in the home of his grandparents, at 26 Trott Street, Battersea, a house now demolished, and in that of his parents at No. 22, that the first English Salesians were given hospitality and shelter on their arrival, in November 1887, from Turin. Mr. & Mrs. Pash did everything humanly possible to welcome them and to provide all reasonable comfort until the newcomers were able to find a small home of their own. There the work of Don Bosco in England began.

Agnes Pash, daughter of these good lay-folk, and her husband, George Bleach, the parents of the future priest, co-operated wholeheartedly in the charitable deed. It is interesting to note that Mrs. Bleach's brother, John Pash, who died early, was the first of our aspirants. His other sister became a Salesian nun. So, too, did Father Bleach's sister, Kathleen. Of his other sisters, Eileen became a Sister of Notre Dame and Marie a Catholic teacher. Their younger brother, Denis, tried his vocation as a Salesian for some time. He died in S. Africa. To the end of their days, Mr. and Mrs. Bleach were zealous parishioners of the parish of the Sacred Heart and loyal co-operators. Mr. Bleach served several Masses every day to the end of his long life. Truly, Father Bleach came of marvellous Catholic Stock.

Harold himself, after his early schooling in the local Sacred Heart school, went out to business for a few years before entering the Salesian novitiate in its last year at Burwash, Sussex. In the spring of the following year, 1921, he was transferred, with his companions, to the new novitiate and scholasticate at Cowley. Here he was temporarily professed in 1921. He made his final vows at Cape Town, S. Africa, on 7th October, 1924. He had gone to S. Africa in that year, following upon the conclusion of his first two years of philosophy at Cowley. It was at Cape Town that he studied theology. Then, as a tribute to his good parents, and as a mark of gratitude for all that was owed by the Salesians to this good family, he was allowed home to be ordained priest by Bishop Amigo of Southwark in his home parish church at Battersea.

He returned then to S. Africa, where he remained until 1936, serving at Cape Town and Lansdowne, first as teacher and then as Prefect of Studies. The years 1937 and 38 saw him back in England, at Beckford (Glos.), after which he was posted as a teacher to our college at Battersea.

On the outbreak of the Second World War, a new field of apostolate opened out for him. The Channel Islands were in imminent danger of a German invasion and the children were evacuated to England for safety. Most of the Catholic children, with their teachers, the French Presentation nuns, and some good Catholic friends were found refuge in a really beautiful house, Moseley Hall, Knutsford, Cheshire. Father Bleach was appointed their chaplain. It was in this capacity that some of the finest work of his life was done. He was a man of very great kindness, with a gift for making friends; a man, too, of great goodness of heart and a priest of deep faith and with an earnest love of souls. The children and their guardians became tremendously attached to him. To this day, he is still remembered in Guernsey with the greatest of affection. After the war was over, he regularly crossed to see his island friends. He was indeed a father to them all.

His stay in Knutsford was not destined to last until the war was ended. Instead, in 1943, he was transferred to Malta as Rector of St. Patrick's. Three years later he returned to England as Prefect of the house at Cowley, a post he retained until 1954.

From 1954 until 1972, he was attached to the house at Battersea, but his task now was to look after the Salesian Co-operators and to try to develop this great work. He travelled widely in the south of England, and the kindliness of his personality and his gift for friendship were now particularly valuable assets for him. In 1972 he became officially linked with the house at Cowley and, whilst retaining his mandate as priest in charge of the Co-operators, he was loaned to do work in the Northampton diocese at Cardington and Bedford. In his new capacity as an acting chaplain to the Royal Air Force, and in his many contacts with the priests of the diocese, he won a most happy name for himself. The secret was the already mentioned unflinching kindness, his gentlemanliness and his ever-ready willingness to give a helping hand whenever and wherever his services might be required. Canon Anthony Hulme, the parish priest and dean of Bedford, with whom he had close associations, manifested by his presence at the good Father's funeral the great love and esteem in which Father Bleach was held by the bishop and priests of Northampton diocese. It should be said here that Father Bleach's vocation sprang from a splendid seeding-ground. He had, as we have seen, the priceless benefit of a good Catholic home and a sterling upbringing in the faith. In addition, he had invaluable training as an altar server in the days of his boyhood and early manhood in the halcyon days of the Sacred Heart Salesian parish at Battersea under the rectorship of Father Macey and with the renowned Father William Kelly as parish priest.

Surely, the seemingly obvious message from all this is that what was so well accomplished in those times in the encouragement and development of priestly and religious vocations constitutes a challenge to us today. Using the same Don Bosco methods, and with a sincere regard for the majesty of the House of God and the holiness of the sanctuary, ought we not to go forth, even in these admittedly difficult times, under the guidance of the Help of Christians and secure in the never-failing grace of God, resolved to do our best to help young souls to embrace a priestly or religious vocation and to be proud to offer their lives to the service of God? Nor should we forget that, from the foundations of sanctuary training and the work of sodalities and other organisations—and especially those with a genuinely apostolic aim—the number of excellent Catholic parents given to the Church must be innumerable.

Father Bleach died at Bedford, after a somewhat wearying and prolonged illness, and was laid to rest in the Salesian plot at Cowley on 11th February, 1977. May he rest in peace!

Give, please, to him and to this province the warm charity of your good prayers.

Yours very sincerely in Don Bosco,

Bernard Higgins. SDB.

Provincial.

DATA FOR THE NECROLOGY: Fr Harold Patrick Bleach, SDB, born at Battersea 17 March 1902. Died Bedford, 8 February, 1977 in the 56th year of his religious profession, and in the 49th of his priesthood.

R.I.P.