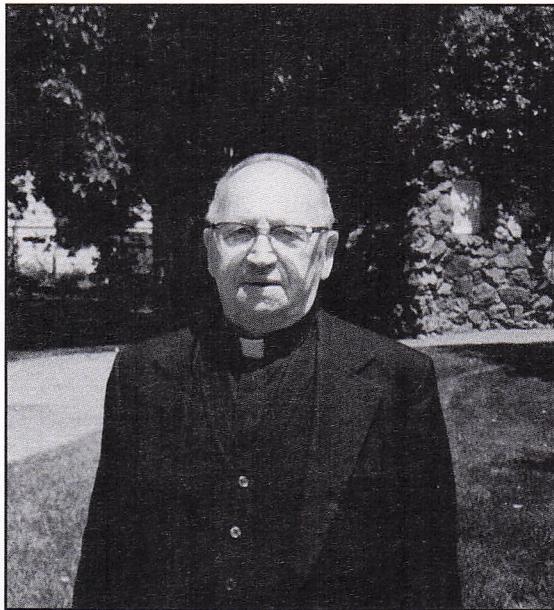


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# Father Gabriel Joseph Zavattaro, S.D.B.

(1909-2005)



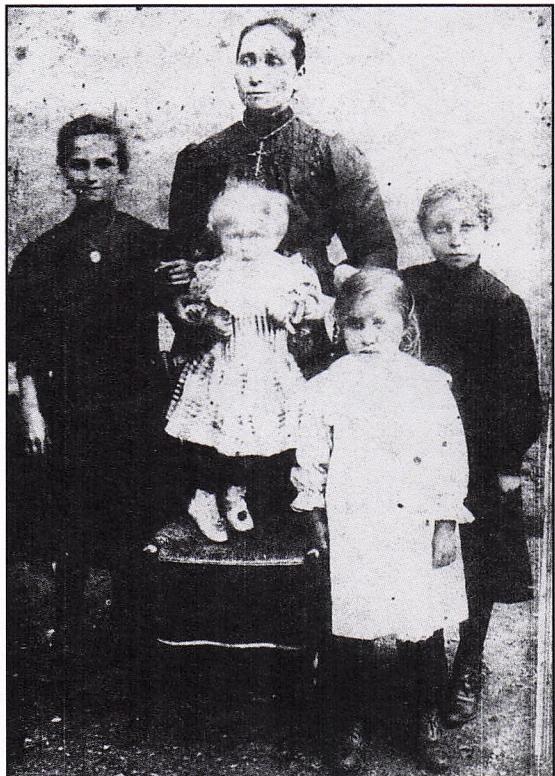
## Gabriel Zavattaro

In the early morning hours of March 21, 2005, death came gently for Father Gabriel Zavattaro, fondly known as the patriarch of the San Francisco Province. He was 96. For the last years of his life Father Gabriel was under the solicitous care of the Sisters of Mercy in their Retirement Center in Oakland, California. The senior Salesian confreres whose lives he touched and with whom he interacted in his various roles of pastor, director, and teacher remember him warmly.

Born in Borgo San Martino on August 13, 1909, the fourth of five siblings, young Gabriel attended the village school there founded by Don Bosco. As he used to proudly say: "I was the first boy enrolled in Don Bosco's school."

From Borgo San Martino Gabriel transferred to the nearby Salesian junior seminary in Penango. At the end of his secondary studies there, a chance meeting with Father Emmanuel Manassero, who was on a recruiting mission for vocations for the fledgling United States Province, proved to be a turning point in the seminarian's life.

Young Gabriel accepted Father Manassero's invitation to continue his studies in New Rochelle, New York — but with one proviso: he wanted his mother's approval before crossing the Atlantic. On learning that her son's destination was not too distant from New Bedford, Massachusetts, Teresa Zavattaro gave her consent. Her four brothers had immigrated to that city almost 20 years



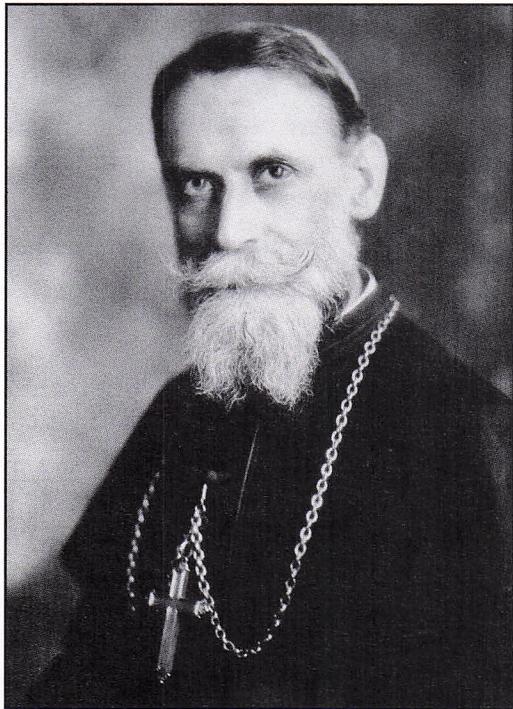
(From left) Maria, mother Teresa, Elena, Felicita and in center baby Gabriel.

earlier. Her son's four uncles, she figured, would keep a watchful and solicitous eye on their nephew.



On the ship "Colombo" (From left) Joseph Romani, Guido Divina, Louis Masoero, Joseph Caselli, Joachin Boccalatte, Gabriel Zavattaro, Paul Sappino. August 1924.

After completing his pre-novitiate studies in Salesian High School, New Rochelle, young Gabriel was accepted as a novice under the tutelage of the legendary Father Francis Binelli. The greatly loved priest, had been chosen by Don Bosco at the age of 25 to be one of the Society's first director of novices. It was to become a life-long role; a position he held in France, Italy, Austria, and finally in New Rochelle, where he died in 1931. Throughout his life Father Gabriel often related that his introduction to Salesian life under the saintly Father Binelli, had been one of the greatest blessings of his life.



*St. Aloysius Versiglia (1873-1930). Canonized by Pope John Paul II on January 10, 2000. The bishop was in the United States for health reasons when he witnessed Gabriel's first vows in New Rochelle, New York. August 15, 1926.*

In 1926 newly professed "Brother" Gabriel actually had found himself doubly blessed. Not only had he completed his novitiate training under the guidance of Father Binelli; he had also made his first profession of vows at the hands of Salesian Bishop Aloysius Versiglia, the saintly bishop who was martyred for the faith in China in 1930. He was canonized by Pope John Paul II in the last years of his reign. In later years Father Gabriel would often allude to these saintly men who had entered his life while still a youth.



*New Rochelle, New York. Gabriel is the young lad seated in front. January 1, 1925.*

A year of philosophy studies in Goshen, New York, followed. Then out of the blue, Brother Gabriel Zavattaro made a decision that would influence the future course of his life as a Salesian. Almost 30 years after the arrival of the first Salesians in the United States, the burgeoning Salesian presence in America had reached a critical decision: the creation of an eastern and western province. This historic event in the history of Don Bosco's work in

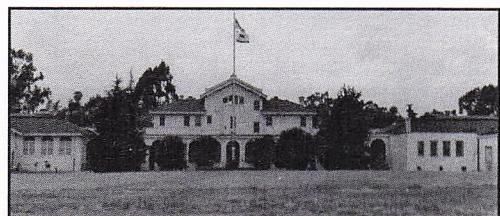
North America is recorded in the minutes of the Salesian General Council in Turin, Italy, of January 27, 1926:

*"A decision has been reached to divide the United States Province. The plan agreed upon is to appoint Father Orestes Trinchieri as provincial of the eastern United States, while Father Emmanuel Manassero, who has completed his term as provincial, will be reassigned and will also act as representative for the Superior Chapter to oversee the development of our work in Australia. Further, Father Angelo Franco in this new alignment has been designated as the new provincial superior of England ... "*

But the sudden death of the then English Provincial Father Francis Scaloni brought these appointments to a halt. A revision of the above master plan underwent a complete realignment. Father Richard Pittini, (later archbishop of Santo Domingo and a major player in the future development of the Salesian work on the east coast), assumed the leadership of the Province of St. Philip, Apostle, New Rochelle, New York. Father Orestes Trinchieri was asked to do an about-face — from east to west — and was appointed provincial of the San Francisco Province, placed under the patronage of St. Andrew, Apostle.

It was during this period of flux and change that Father Trinchieri approached the newly professed confrere from Borgo San Martino with an offer he couldn't refuse. The aura of California still prevailed in those days, and young Gabriel willingly accepted his new provincial's

overture to travel with him to the land of El Dorado. But coast to coast train travel in the 1920s, especially second class with unadorned and rugged accommodations, did not prove to be a "dream experience." Always the pragmatist young Gabriel did not thrill to the sight of "purple mountains and fruited plains" during what seemed to be an endless week-long trans-continental train ride. He summed up that experience in a brief comment in a letter home: "It was one long tiresome train trip."



*St. Francis School Watsonville* as it appeared when Br. Gabriel arrived. *September 1927.*

Brother Gabriel's first assignment in California was a three-year teaching internship in newly staffed Saint Francis School in Watsonville. This educational institution, acquired from a religious order that found that it could no longer cope with its rebellious and rough-hewn inmates (what later novelists would call 'tough dead-end kids') had been offered to the Salesians by the local bishop. For an eighteen-year-old inexperienced newly professed Salesian who lacked any kind of teaching experience, that first assignment was not an easy one. But Gabriel survived unbowed and unscarred.

With his three-year internship at Saint Francis School completed, and perhaps with a

welcome sigh of relief, Brother Gabriel wrote: "In 1930 I was fortunate to be sent to our International Theological Institute in Turin ("La Crocetta") to begin my theological studies." Luckier still, but yet unknown to him, he would later find himself in Rome in 1934 to witness the canonization of St. John Bosco. At "La Crocetta" he was also fortunate to take courses in theology from highly esteemed Salesian scholars whose names have become legendary in Salesian annals. Their erudition noticeably and generously rubbed off on their student from the Golden West. The young student of theology also found time to hone his musical talent as a violinist in the university orchestra, sharpen his skills on the school's soccer field, and in the summer challenge the Italian alps.



*Mary Help of Christians Church, New York City. Mass on returning to the U.S. after Ordination. (Left to right) Gabriel Zavattaro, Guido Divina, Louis Masoero, Paul Zolin. Summer, 1934.*

Ordained in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, the young priest's first assignment was that of "Prefect of Studies" of the Salesian Junior Seminary in Richmond, California. This writer well remembers his arrival on the seminary grounds in the waning days of the summer of 1934. An eager group of seminarians had surrounded the school's official big, cavernous, black Buick when it came to a stop. As he alighted we greeted our new mentor and teacher with a rousing burst of applause. It was hard to tell at the moment whether the newly appointed prefect of studies — bespectacled and rail thin — was terrified or elated at the raucous welcome he received.



*Richmond. Brothers in the top row from left: Joseph Korman, Joachin Boccalatte, Gabriel Zavattaro, Fred Arata, Alphonse Straub and Alfred Broccardo. Dec. 18, 1930*

Supervising the academic performance of seminarians was only a part of Fr. Gabriel's post as prefect of studies. In those days, such a position called for "a man for all seasons." And that it seemed he effortlessly became. Besides projecting the symbol of 'law and order,' Father Gabriel, as he became quickly known, taught Latin, directed the seminary choir, organized and sometimes guided amateur theatricals and three-act plays, and

threw himself into sport activities with the seminarians. To top all this he pursued graduate studies at the prestigious University of California in Berkeley. In a little more than a year he earned his master's degree in Latin. This he achieved at a time when confreres had to rely on bus or streetcar to get to their destination. Which meant endless hours on crowded buses or long delays waiting for streetcars that never came. As Father Gabriel used to say in his artless way: "I spent more time in getting to school than in going to school." But in the end this arduous routine paid off handsomely. Not only was he the first Salesian to earn an academic master's degree in the San Francisco Province, but he graduated with honors (*summa cum laude*). Under pressure he several times was made to concede that there were occasions when his classical studies professor consulted him to help untie knotty problems in Latin language construction that befuddled him.

With his newly earned academic honors, Father Gabriel was soon called to the halls of academe. He was appointed dean of studies at Don Bosco College in Newton, New Jersey — at that time a fully accredited and recognized institution of higher learning. But this collegial post lasted only two years. In 1940 he was recalled to his beloved seminary in Richmond — this time as its director, a position he held for the next six years. If there was a period of ordeal in this Salesian confrere's life, it occurred during the early 40s when war clouds hung over

Europe and were now soon to darken threateningly Father Gabriel's adopted country and jeopardize his position as seminary director.

With the declaration of war by Italy against the United States, the fallout of hostilities was quickly felt in California. Non-naturalized Italian-Americans living in the state along the California coastline were declared "enemy aliens" and compelled to move their residence inland from the Pacific shore to a "safe zone." However, they were treated far unlike the Japanese, including those who held citizenship, who were harshly uprooted from their homes and confined in concentration camps located in the West's wastelands.



*Turin.* Fr. Gabriel chimes in center stage as Msgr. Vincent Cimatti plays the organ at the 1947 General Chapter.

With Richmond's city limits barely touching the 'danger zone,' Father Gabriel, director of the junior seminary, felt the axe that forced him to relocate. His naturalization petition had been delayed and was ensnarled somewhere in red tape. He was forced to pull up stakes and locate in a sanctioned and less 'threatening' area.

Though ousted, he was undaunted. The director of the seminary came up with a subtle solution of his own — a unique version of

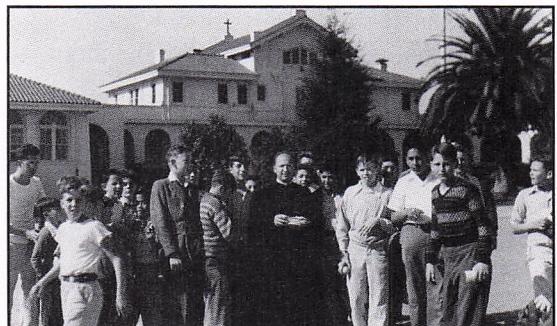
bilocation. He moved as ordered to an approved residence a few miles east of Richmond, the rectory of the Salesian parish of St. Joseph in Oakland. To fulfill the letter of the law, he slept there at night, and like a shadowy doppelganger he commuted to Richmond where for the rest of the day it was business as usual. He also took immediate action to resolve his exile. He recruited the assistance of an influential lawyer in San Francisco, close to the Salesians, and in a short time (with some political maneuvering) he received his naturalization papers in record time and was soon back in Richmond. This time a legal and fulltime resident.



***Richmond.** A fond farewell is given as Fr. Gabriel leaves Salesian House of Studies after 6 years as director to take that position at St. Francis, Watsonville. August 30, 1946.*

With the end of WWII, in 1946 Father Gabriel moved on to greener pastures — literally. As the saying goes: You can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy. He returned after sixteen years to the school of his first assignment. No longer an anxious and callow young seminarian, Father Gabriel was appointed director of what had become a popular and well respected boarding school. After the war a steady influx of farm

workers had turned the city of Watsonville from a sleepy country town into a fast-growing agricultural area known as the Pajaro Valley. Taking his cue from his surroundings Father Gabriel soon developed a flourishing farm complex on Saint Francis School's fertile and extensive property.



***Watsonville.** Mail call for resident students in the late 1940s.*

In no time cows roamed the rich pastureland, and steers grazed on the nearby hillside slopes. Lush orchards flourished, and a vineyard ere long took root. Some of the harvested cornucopia was marketed, but most found its way to the tables of the community and school dining halls. In his new role as gentleman farmer, the country boy from Borgo San Martino was never happier.

The year 1951 was to underscore definitively for Father Gabriel a turning point in his career as a Salesian. The ministry of the school gave way to the ministry of the parish — from school bells to church bells. With a few interim changes of assignments—vice provincial, director of the Salesian Province Resi-

dence—he would spend twenty five years as assistant and then pastor of SS. Peter and Paul church. His drive and dedication would in those years see him grow as a caring priest and a well-known community leader. As his pastorate neared its end, he would also witness the dramatic change that transformed the North Beach church into a pervasive multi-ethnic parish. For example, the thousands of Chinese immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong who had arrived in San Francisco during the 1970s soon called for the addition of a Salesian Chinese priest to reach out to the Chinese community. Shortly after, a Sunday Mass in Chinese was added to the Mass roster.



*Watsonville.* Lucian Lomello and Gabriel are greeted by a visitor at the “Cow Palace” in the hills above the school.

Father Gabriel’s dedicated and fruitful priestly activity did not go unobserved during his tenure as pastor. On the occasion of the celebration of the Golden Jubilee of his ordination, praise and plaudits poured in from all sides. The Senate Rules Committee in Sacramento, the state capital, honored him with a “Commendation” for his services to

the citizens of the city of Saint Francis as pastor and educator. An ornate scroll from the Vatican signed by Pope John Paul II, accompanied with his Apostolic Blessing, was presented to him during a parish festivity. The words that ended the text of the blessing captured the essence of Father Gabriel’s 50 years of priesthood: “... may your happy anniversary continue to strengthen all in your community to live a genuine Christian life.” For this auspicious occasion the San Francisco Italian consul presented the honoree with the “Star of Solidarity,” a medal, that conferred the highest honors to a recipient outside of Italy. A paternal letter of congratulations that arrived from the rector major of the Salesian Society, Very Rev. Egidio Viganò, SDB, helped cap the many encomiums Father Gabriel deservedly received.



*San Francisco.* Giovanni Gronchi, president of Italy and his wife are greeted by Fr. Gabriel in front of SS. Peter and Paul Church. May 6, 1956.

All too often a pastor’s service and sacrifices and achievements fade in time to just a footnote in the annals of parish history. Fortunately for the parish of SS. Peter and Paul, Father Gabriel left an ineffaceable legacy. Under

his drive and initiative, a commemorative volume, entitled "*The Chronicles of the 'Italian Cathedral' of the West, 1884-1984*," was published to mark the centennial of the founding of the church that rose from the ashes of the San Francisco fire and earthquake of 1906 to become the magnificent church that now faces Washington Square, the green oasis of North Beach.

*The Chronicles*, a hefty volume of almost 400 pages, is replete with never-before published photographs that virtually create a pictorial essay of the history of the first Salesian presence in the Golden State. Not only are old landmarks of North Beach featured, but photos of the very first Salesians, who would otherwise not only be dead but entirely forgotten, are brought to life again. The San Francisco Province will always be grateful to Father Gabriel not only for preserving us a vivid treasure trove of priceless memories of our beginnings, but also for creating a matchless historic artifact of our Salesian history in the West.



**San Francisco.** Fr. Gabriel leads Archbishop John Quinn through the Centennial Book.

Father Gabriel's awards and testimonials

and honoraria will gradually disappear like footprints on the sands of time. But his most outstanding contribution will not only have a lasting memory but a lasting reality. In 1951 he was appointed the chief financial officer of the San Francisco Province, a post he held until 1980. His financial acumen in time developed into fiscal expertise that not only kept the San Francisco Province from drowning in red ink but anchored it on a sound financial foundation for years to come. But his crowning achievement came when he was able to enroll the Salesians into the Social Security program. Religious groups for quite some time were not eligible for Social Security benefits because they did not contribute their required share of payroll taxes. When legislation was passed that gave access to religious groups to become eligible for Social Security and Medicare medical insurance if a sizeable and one-time payment was made in lieu of previous unpaid payroll taxes, Father Gabriel seized the moment. At the cost



**Caesar's, North Beach.** Fr. Gabriel receives congratulations on the occasion of his 65th anniversary of ordination from Fr. Armand Oliveri, pastor; John Brattesani, Frank Jordan, former mayor San Francisco and Fr. Nicholas Reina, provincial. **July 8, 1999.**

of considerable financial sacrifice he came up with the required sum. That sum has been repaid numerous times as hospitalized and ailing confreres now benefit from Father Gabriel's wise and enlightened investment.

As Father Gabriel reached his sunset years he retired as pastor and chief financial officer, but remained in residence in the beloved church where he had spent almost half his adult years. The elderly, the shut-ins, and the seniors of the parish now became his new apostolate. Feeling the toll that his 92 years had taken on his declining health, the patriarch of the province opted to retire to the Sisters of Mercy Retirement Center. There for the next three years the angels of mercy lovingly cared for him. On March 21 the words he had long prayed at Mass: *"In baptism he died with Christ may he now share in his Resurrection,"* took on a personal reality. At age 96, the man who over the years had become an endearing and cherished confrere, is now sharing in the glorious promise of the Resurrection.

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### **ENVOI**

*The Salesian old timers of the San Francisco Province will long remember with fond affection and happy memories the man they called "Father Gabe." Because of the*

*roles he played — teacher, mentor, director, pastor, tight-fisted guardian of the province coffers — most of us interacted with him during the 71 years of his priesthood. We joshed with him, worked with him, and cheered for the Giants and heckled the dastardly Dodgers with him. There wasn't an ounce of pretentiousness about him. He loved and lived the simple life with its small rewarding pleasures. He was always accessible for a chat or a show-down, but you could always disagree with him without getting disagreeable. Many of us became beneficiaries of the fierce love he had for anything 'Salesian.' The reason is easy to discern: he was formed and mentored by a saintly director of novices who was personally tutored for the role by Don Bosco himself; he made his first profession of vows in the presence of a Salesian bishop who has recently been declared a saint; he 'did' his theology in a school which produced both saints and scholars; he was ordained in a house of God built by Don Bosco and dedicated to Mary Help of Christians. All of those Salesian moments he experienced in some way rubbed off on those of us who worked and played and lived the Salesian life with him. And for all that, Father Gabe, we will always be grateful.*

**Michael Ribotta, SDB**

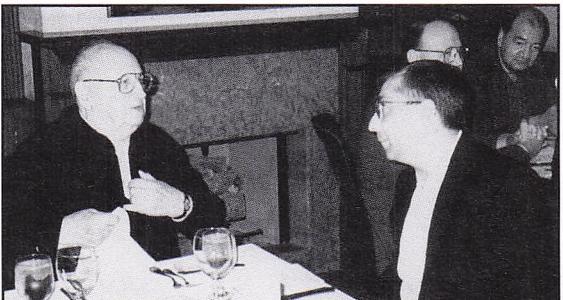
SS. Peter and Paul Church  
San Francisco, California

May 24, 2005

## Greeting visitors to the Province



**Richmond.** Visit of Cardinal Yu Pin, bishop of Nan King, to the Salesian Junior Seminary for the Memorial Day celebrations in the early 1940s. (Left to right) Fr. Gabriel, Monsignor Alvin Wagner, Cardinal, Fr. Alvin Fedrigotti, provincial, guest, Fr. Joseph Costanzo and Fr. Alphonse Straub.



**San Francisco.** At the Harris restaurant with Fr. Giovanni Mazzali of the General Council at one of Gabriel's many celebrations.



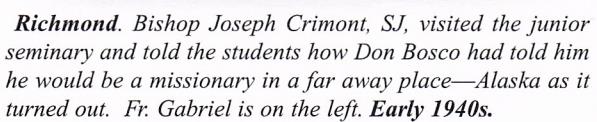
**San Francisco.** A smiling Fr. Gabriel responds to something that the Rector Major Luigi Ricceri said. 1973.



**San Francisco.** While David Purdy, pastor, ponders serious things, Fr. Gabriel and Michael Ribotta are deep in discussion of important matters.



**Watsonville.** Fr. Anthony Candela from the General Council in Turin visits St. Francis. (From left) Fr. Julius Chiste, Fr. Alfred Cogliandro, provincial, Fr. Alfred Broccardo, Fr. Joseph Simcic, Fr. Candela and Fr. Gabriel. September 24, 1951.



**Richmond.** Bishop Joseph Crimont, SJ, visited the junior seminary and told the students how Don Bosco had told him he would be a missionary in a far away place—Alaska as it turned out. Fr. Gabriel is on the left. Early 1940s.

## Father Gabriel Joseph Zavattaro, SDB

Born: Borgo San Martino, Italy  
August 13, 1909

First Profession: New Rochelle, New York  
August 15, 1926

Ordained: Turin, Italy  
July 8, 1934

Died: Oakland, California  
March 21, 2005



*Salesians of St. John Bosco*

SAN FRANCISCO PROVINCE  
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San Francisco, California, 94109