



BROTHER FRANCIS BOCCOTTI

1911 - 1994

Brother Francis Boccotti

Two weeks after he entered Brandon Hospital in Brandon, Florida, Br. Francis passed away on March 6, 1994. Despite experiencing some chest pain and shortness of breath, everyone who saw him the first week of his stay in the hospital thought he would be coming home soon. He, too, was in remarkably good spirits. However, in the early morning of February 27th, Br. Francis had a heart attack followed quickly by a stroke. Alert and despite his difficulty in speaking, Br. Francis prayed his beloved Rosary with his visitors and tried his best, as he had for more than 60 years, to be a good son of Don Bosco.

Br. Francis was born on April 2, 1911, to Pietro and Maria Boccotti in Camairago, Milano, on the lower plains by the Po River in the Province of Milan in the Lombard of Northern Italy. With his father's early death, the task of raising his nine brothers and sisters fell on young Francis. Taking the reins of his father in hand at such a young age accounted for his maturity in all his dealings. He helped his family continue to be share croppers of the property of the Barlome's, a family who had owned the land for over 400 years and had given the Church, St. Charles Borromeo, to the village.

At the age of 23, Francis acted on the call by God to work with youth in the spirit of Don Bosco. He attended the minor seminary in the area of Piedmont in a town called Ivrea, a town well-known for the Olivetti Computer, makers of the first typewriter. Fr. Innocent Clementi, ten years his junior, remembers Br. Francis in charge of the upkeep of the infirmary. "Near Christmas, when I was thirteen, Br. Francis served me food but I felt too sick to eat it. Not wanting it to go to waste, Br. Francis took care of it himself - he ate it! He didn't look for excuses. He accepted his scolding politely - even though it was over done!

"Another day I was in Greek class. The windows were open. It was spring time. Romantic music was coming from the vineyard. It was Br. Francis singing a love song. We all stopped listening to the teacher and looked out the window. The teacher got very perturbed. After awhile when the songs continued distracting us, the teacher sent one of us down with a note and the music stopped. What a pity!

"One year later in the spring of 1935, war broke out between Italy and Ethiopia. One day, to our surprised eyes, two police came into our school looking for a certain Francis Boccotti. Our superior was called and told he was harboring a deserter from the army! Francis was put in handcuffs and taken away. Francis had not told the government about his change of address. When the draft call came for the army, of course he was not home, and his family did not bother relaying the message. When he did not answer the call, he was classified as a deserter. He was put in jail and then sent to Florence to meet his company, but they had already left for Ethiopia. He was eventually sent to Ethiopia and went through the whole campaign. He was in the artillery corps. He came back from that campaign with a bad back. That was one of the major reasons why he never was moved from Tampa where the hot weather was thought to help his back.

"When the war ended, he was back with us. No bragging about his time in the army, he went back to his work with great energy and a growth in maturity. He entered the novitiate in 1937 in Newton, New Jersey, and served on the farm at Newton until 1946 when he was sent to Tampa. Francis made his First Profession on September 8, 1938, and his Perpetual Profession on September 8, 1944."

Br. Francis' life here at Mary Help of Christians School was and is one that touches the lives of every child and adult as soon as he or she enters the property. How many times have you heard from people about the peace of mind they receive just walking the grounds of our school? Br. Francis is in every tree he planted, bush he trimmed, and flower he cultivated.

Fr. Clementi remembers shortly after Br. Francis arrived, the Director wanted to widen the entrance to the school. Mrs. Alicia Neve, the founder and "Mother" of Mary Help of Christians, as the boys called her, had been in an accident coming onto the property because of the narrowness of the gates. So the gates were widened along with the road. Br. Francis mentioned to the Director what was needed to be done to landscape the front. Fr. Director politely listened and thought the safe bet was to bring in a professional landscaper. The finished job, however, was not what was hoped for. So Father thought, "Why not give this new brother a crack at it?" The place became a show place! From that time on, every director had to look no further than Br. Francis to make our school what it is today! Br. Francis mapped out the property and with the help of the University of Florida, tested all the soil on the grounds to make sure the right plants were planted and received what they needed to prosper. And, of course, all who enter the grounds have a beautiful place to pray and

commune with God.”

Br. Francis was a specialist when it came to making a homesick boy feel at home. He would take them on his trips and ask them to help with his job even when it meant by the time the boy had finished “helping”, Br. Francis would have more work than he started with!

Miss Carolyn Tipton, a teacher at Mary Help for the past fifteen years, was always amazed that Br. Francis could take the shyest and most withdrawn boy under his wing, and the young man would blossom - not unlike all those plants and flowers Br. Francis could green-thumb into beauty! She’s pretty sure he even scolded one now and then for some small indiscretion against Mother Nature, but, though the misdeed was not committed again, the boy’s self-esteem was never hurt. Br. Francis could gently push, pull and coerce the best out of everyone he came into contact with. He never seemed to fail with even one soul! Fr. Clementi supports this point with the fact that in letters from the boys - now men - they felt one of the best things the school did for them was to accustom them to work and appreciate the outdoors. The man especially responsible for that? Br. Francis, of course!

Br. Dominic Casiraghi told of looking out his window two days before Br. Francis was to go to the hospital. He saw Francis on his hands and knees, planting roses, his most beloved of plants. A day later, Fr. Lou Molinelli had just returned from recuperating from a long illness. Br. Francis stopped him in the hallway and asked how he was feeling. He then asked Father Lou to pray for him because, as he said, “I am getting ready to go home to heaven.” Fr. Lou said he’d said this with such a serenity. Would that we all could be that serene about meeting the Lord!

Fr. Lou also had one special memory of Br. Francis from his first year of practical training here at Mary Help. “Br. Francis had just gotten over having bypass surgery and was no longer able to do the work of moving the irrigation pipes in the orange groves. I used to be free on Saturday afternoons, and I used that time to run and get some exercise away from the hustle and bustle of resident school life. I always thought it was rather strange that no matter when I chose to run, Br. Francis would always find me! Since I was right there, he would ask if I minded helping him move the irrigation pipes. It wasn’t until much later I discovered that he would watch for me from his window, and, knowing my route, would be down in just the ‘right’ spot when I ‘happened’ to pass! I don’t think I ever ran more than a mile that year, but I got plenty of exercise in other ways!”

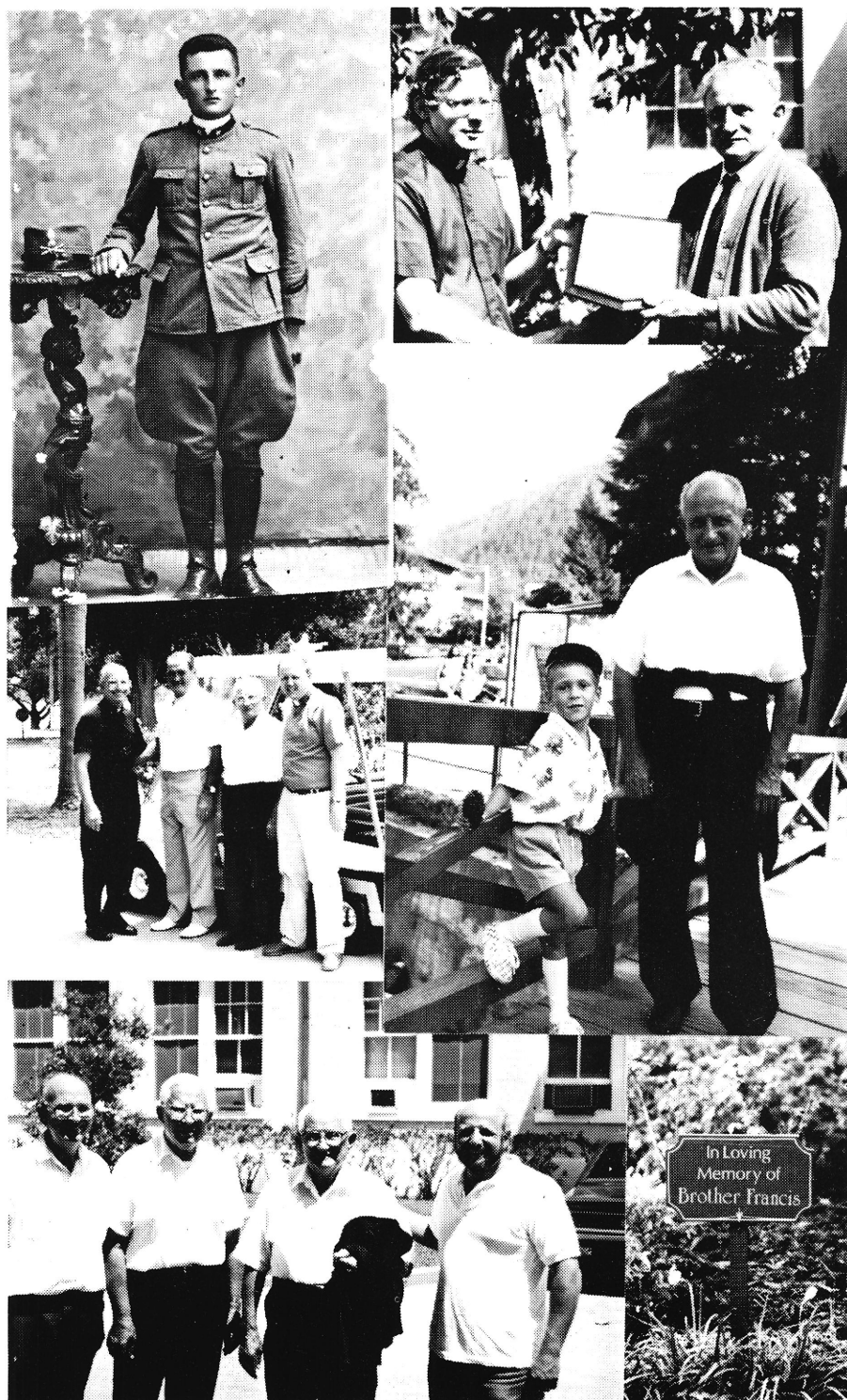
Mrs. Lori Anctil, Fr. John Nazzaro’s secretary and a long-time friend of the school said, “Br. Francis was a humble man who lived the Salesian system and beliefs of Don Bosco every day of his life. He took boys who were lost and showed them that each of them had a special talent. He showed the children the beauty of a rose, the smell of rain, and the love of a man who cared and nurtured them like they were his own children which, to him, they were. Br. Francis did all of this in such a low key and gentle way that the boys never knew they were learning what true friendship is: humility, a smile, a hug, but most of all a special memory that you will carry with you all the days of your life. Our boys will always think of him and smile. He turned many boys’ lives around in the years he was here, and, in turn, his boys will continue his legacy of love, friendship and hope in the future.”

With Br. Francis gone, there is a great need for all of us to keep his memory alive. Everyone reading this has some special memory of Br. Francis or perhaps a special way of keeping his spirit alive. Mr. Lew Swick, with some friends of Mary Help, are tending Br. Francis’ roses in front of the main building and the chapel. The school Br. Francis so loved has established the Brother Francis Boccotti Resident Award. The award is to be given to the 8th grade resident who in the past year has shown leadership and a Christian concern for the younger boys here at Mary Help.

There will not be many Br. Francis Boccottis in our lives. Remember him. Pray for him. Carry on in the spirit he showed each one of us - simple reason, faithful religion and gentle kindness.

Yours in Don Bosco,

Fr. James Mulloy, S.D.B.



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Fr. James Mulloy, S.D.B.
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