

**Fr. Diego Borgatello, SDB**  
(1911 - 1994)

Salesian Provincial Residence  
New Rochelle, New York

July 4, 1994

Dear Confreres,

On Saturday, April 23, 1994, at 4:30 a.m. Father Diego Borgatello at age eighty-three was called to his Creator to reap the abundant harvest of a life of ministry and loving service. Sixty-six of these years were spent as a Salesian of Don Bosco and fifty-seven years were spent in priestly ministry.

Father Diego suffered from cancer for many years and in the past few years was frequently hospitalized. During the past year his condition worsened as the cancer became more invasive, spreading to his spine, bladder and lungs. So for him death was always not far away, and in this condition he was well prepared for the event when it actually happened. At Easter this year, we knew that it was just a matter of days. Twenty-four-hour nursing care was provided, and he was able to spend these last weeks in the company of his confreres at the Provincial House. During these weeks Father Diego was cheerful despite intense pain. Accompanied by his nurse, he came to the dining room for meals with us. In conversations he would recall the days of his past and would switch from English to Italian and back and forth again. Confreres visited him frequently, offering him comfort and encouragement along the way. All during the past year, Father Robert Savage was constantly attentive to Father Diego, seeing to his needs, taking him to the doctor, spending time with him, providing care and nourishment both spiritual and physical, and supporting him as he prepared for death.

The wake and viewing were at Davis Funeral Home. On Tuesday, April 26, his body was received at the Salesian High School Chapel by his Director, Father Donald Zarkoski. Mass of Christian Burial began at 7:30 p.m., at which Father Timothy Ploch, provincial, was main celebrant and homilist. During the homily, Father Ploch brought to life for us the spirit of Father Diego, recalling his dedication, his precise attention to detail, his strong convictions, his conservative political ideals and most especially his great love for the young people he ministered to and their response to that love. There were about 250 people at the Mass and over 50 concelebrants along with many of our Salesian brothers and sisters. On the following day, the burial was at the Salesian cemetery in Goshen, New York.

It was inspiring to see at these services the many young people whom Father Diego ministered to and counselled. They came and stayed and prayed and in conversations revealed how much Father Diego had helped them in life and what a tremendous influence he was on them. Many of them were altar boys he met serving his Sunday Mass at St. Joseph's Church. They in turn would bring their friends to meet Father Diego. They would come just to visit, to play chess, to snack on cookies and milk, but in the course of time he led them to prayer and to consider the direction of their lives. He planned trips with them to Niagara Falls, hikes at Bear Mountain and nearby parks, visits to our Salesian houses and works. For each

boy that came, he kept a folder recording correspondence, important events, record of visits, results of chess games, photos etc.

He left this message for his boys (young men now):

To All My Young Friends:

Thanks for all the happiness you brought me. Forgive me if I ever hurt your feelings. Pray for me. I will not forget you!

If you have a folder in my cabinet file, come and ask for it. It's the only thing I can leave you as a remembrance of me.

Never forget to say a "Hail, Mary" before falling asleep. God bless you and your dear ones. Through God's infinite mercy, may we all meet again in heaven!

Your friend forever, Father Diego.

Now as they come back to claim their folders, they recall the great impact Father Diego had on their lives. He was for them truly a father and friend in the Salesian tradition. The story of how his "oratory" grew out of an evening walk with his rosary, kids with time on their hands and a chess board has the endearing qualities of the history of the early Salesians. One of the best moments of a community meeting was the time Father Diego narrated this story for the community.

Diego Borgatello was born on January 5, 1911, in Vercelli, Italy, son of Carl and Catherine Melchiorre, and was baptized at the church of St. Eusebius in Vercelli. His elementary school was the De La Salle Christian Brothers School in Borgo Dora, Turin, and his secondary school was at the Salesian Motherhouse, Turin (1923-27). He spent his pre-novitiate and novitiate at Villa Moglia, Chieri, where he made his first profession on September 13, 1928. After novitiate, from 1928-1930, he went to Cowley, Oxford, England, for philosophy studies and returned to Turin, to Rebaudengo for practical training as teacher and assistant from 1930 to 1933. His theological studies were at Castelnuovo Don Bosco from 1933 to 1937. He was ordained at the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin on July 4, 1937.

After ordination in 1937, he came to Don Bosco College in Newton, New Jersey, to be catechist and teacher and remained in the United States ever since. His Salesian career took him to Salesian School in Goshen, New York, first as prefect of studies (1941-42) and then as prefect (1953-59), to Salesian High School in New Rochelle, New York, as catechist and teacher (1942-45), to Don Bosco College as teacher of moral theology (1945-47), to Don Bosco Prep in Ramsey, New Jersey, as catechist (1947-53), to Bellflower, California, as pastoral theology

professor (1959-60), to Don Bosco College as prefect (1960-62), to New Rochelle as professor of pastoral theology (1962-63). In 1963 he began the work as editor-in-chief of the English edition of *The Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco* and it was during this time, too, that he began his ministry to the youngsters of the area so that he could keep in touch with youth while doing the exacting work on the *Memoirs*.

Father Diego earned the following degrees: a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy (1930), a Master of Arts in Theology (1937) and a Bachelor of Science in Library Science (1949). His teaching fields were in languages (French, Italian, Latin), religion, and moral and pastoral theology. He is best known to many in our houses as an administrator holding the office of prefect. He administered this office with great care and attention to detail and certainly added his own touch. There was always careful attention paid to order and cleanliness of the house and the grounds. Preventive maintenance was practiced before it became a household word. Food was plentiful and healthy. Confreres and boys were always well taken care of. Many remember his notes calling attention to order and cleanliness always in a polite but firm way. In his administration of our schools he always insisted on maintaining a high degree of professionalism. In his dealings with others, there was always a very personal touch, always a sensitivity to the needs of others.

One of his favorite pastimes was bicycle riding. He tried to go out on his bike for a five-mile trek every day the weather was good, even in the cold of winter. It was marvelous to see this man in his 80's riding the streets of New Rochelle and Larchmont. He rode his bike until a collision with a car demolished the bike. Although his boys bought him a new bike, his failing health prevented him from using it. He still hoped that he would ride again some day.

Father Diego loved table fellowship. We remember him for the delightful banter at dinner when he could be maneuvered willingly into the center of conversation. He seemed to love being teased into narrating his trips across the Atlantic in the great Ocean Liners with names like Leonardo da Vinci. He enjoyed ending the evening meal with a glass of Hearty Burgundy, a piece of French bread and a chunk of good cheese. One part always finished ahead of the other two, requiring replenishment and thus starting a fresh round of bread, wine, and cheese until the last word had been spoken and the director stood for prayers. Oh, how he could enjoy his meals. He was formidable in conversations at table. Long before he got hearing aids, he was deaf to topics of no interest to him. When computers came into the house in the early 80's, he put the whole subject under the category of "shop talk" and banned it from his table. When things got dull, all anyone had to do to liven up the room was mention Andrew Greeley, women's rights, abortion or a Democrat. He would enter in attack mode, and life returned to the dinner table. He would clinch an argument with Latin certitude straight-faced to the punch line.

His legend will always be heavy with the image of an immovable conservative. But

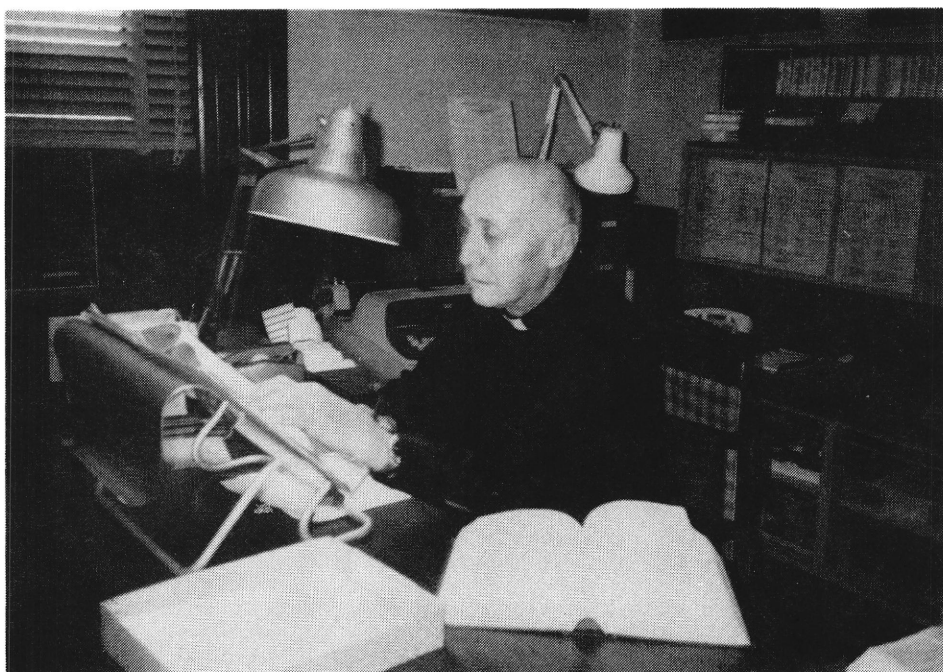


there was so much more. Like the night he told the community he was being treated for cancer. He had told the director and provincial long before. For him, personal matters were shared vertically: himself to his superiors, to God. For a long time we did not know about his cancer and so there was a fair amount of criticism and joking about his annual two-day stay at the New Rochelle hospital. In that good-night talk about his cancer, he taught that we never know each other well enough to criticize, and we always know enough to love. The lesson was how much we lose of our brothers' understanding when we become too vertical in our thinking, values and relationships.

One of Fr. Diego's favorite memory gems was taken from the days when he learned English and was awed by the array of synonyms in Dickens' description of Ebenezer Scrooge: "Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! ..." Diego would all but giggle with delight as he repeated the whole paragraph and it didn't take much coaxing to get him to do so. There was too his formula for a good cup of espresso: Black as the devil, sweet as an angel, and hot as h-e-l-l (he would wiggle around spelling out the bad word as though he really shouldn't say it).

The following reflections are based on the homily delivered by Fr. Timothy Ploch at the Mass of Christian Burial for Father Diego:

God has a sense of humor. Anyone who knew Father Diego knew he was Republican to the core, and he died the same day as President Richard Nixon. He delighted in the letter he received from President Clinton on the anniversary of his profession, yet he hung the letter from President Bush in his office. Father Diego was an exact and exacting man, a man of meticulous detail, who knew exactly what he liked and didn't, and let the rest of us know about it, clearly. He had no hesitation to ask cooks, waiters, doctors, nurses, provincials, anyone who listened, to get things right, the way he wanted them. Orderly to a fault, he used to have his boys run drills the night before a camping trip, on how best to pack the luggage in quickly, efficiently and with the most economy of space. He asked Brother Andy Lacombe to make an exact scale drawing of the area his bicycle accident occurred last year so no one would misunderstand exactly what happened. He kept folders on each of his young friends filled with letters, copies of his replies, scores of their chess games, notes they left on the door when he wasn't in, directions, the amount of chocolate chip cookies they ate, when the last confession was made and many other details. He kept meticulous records of every medication prescribed for him, its actual and possible side effects, precisely how many hours he slept each day, exactly what each of his doctors told him or what he thought they should have told him



Fr. Diego at his desk with the Biographical Memoirs



Fr. Diego with the published volumes of the Biographical Memoirs



On one of the many Niagra Falls trips



Hiking at Bear Mountain Park



Visiting one of his sick friends:  
a family portrait

(and God help them if they forgot). It may seem he was a driven man, yet he had a smile that could light up a room, attract the hard hearted and the cynical, and once his friend, you were a friend forever. This and so much more could be said. Each of us, confrere, student, colleague, friend or penitent, could tell delightful stories of our relationship with him and of our sorrow at his passing. He was a man who made an impact on the lives of those he encountered.

Father Diego spent more than 30 years as editor-in-chief of the English translation of The *Biographical Memoirs*. Fifteen volumes were completed and published. There were only a few more chapters left of volume 16. It was a great disappointment to him that he could not finish the work. Nonetheless, what he did complete is a legacy for English-speaking Salesians, and we cannot underestimate the import of Father Diego's life work, his tour-de-force, on the Salesian Family. This work will also have a place in church history. Generations can now read in English the story of our saintly founder from eye-witness accounts. Father Diego has done more good for the Salesian mission and the advancement of the kingdom of God among English-speaking Salesians than any monument we raise.

Our Constitutions urge us to study and imitate Don Bosco. Father Diego's work has made that possible for us and for so many generations to come. We can now study him in our own language, since Father Diego has given us in English translation "a living portrait of Don Bosco" culled from the memory of those who were his contemporaries and from his own writings and papers.

There was a side of Father Diego himself that was a living portrait of Don Bosco --the oratorian heart of an unlikely old man who captivated the hearts of a great number of young people and who journeyed with them in their life's struggles. In this day and age of scandals caused by priests, it is refreshing and encouraging to see all the young people coming to pay respect to an 83-year-old priest from another part of the world who was a living portrait of Don Bosco.

This too is a remarkable and compelling legacy left to his confreres. His work: professional, competent, expert, scholarly, could not seduce him away from the young --from direct, personal, loving contact with young people. Just as it was for Don Bosco and his boys, so also Father Diego loved his young friends, busy as he was, and they knew it. And knowing this they came to know more of God. He did not plan, set-up or build an oratory. With his oratorian



heart, he was a living oratory. It is only when more of us return to direct, personal and loving contact with the young, no matter how professional or busy we are, that our province will grow. This too was Father Diego's life work that now accompanies him to his reward in the Salesian garden.

May you, Father Diego, now find rest from your labors, for your work accompanies you, *The Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco*, and his living portrait in our memory of you.

In the *Journal of Salesian Studies* (Spring 1994, Volume V, Number 1), Father Michael Ribotta writes this tribute:

### In Memoriam

As we go to press we have just learned of the passing of **Father Diego Borgatello** of the New Rochelle Province, on April 23. He was 83. Father Borgatello's name is familiar to the readers of the English version of the *Memorie Biografiche*. For almost 30 years he worked zealously and with total dedication on a monumental task of translation. Often during those years he encountered numerous hurdles; when he could not go around them, he just cut through them rather than delay or jeopardize his work. Were it not for his undiminished commitment during these past three decades, hundreds, perhaps thousands of Salesians in the English-speaking world would never have had the joy of reading and relishing the thousands of delightful pages of the English *Biographical Memoirs*. For them he unlocked those pages of the *Memorie*, long out of reach, and led them through the delightful episodes, moving scenes, and exciting events that made the life of our Founder so fascinating to read. Moreover, our debt to Father Borgatello will increase over the years as Italian becomes less and less the lingua franca of the Salesian Society.

In his last years, as his health began to fail, he confided to me that he prayed daily for the strength to finish the task that since 1964 he had given virtually every waking hour. But it was not to be. However, each of the fifteen volumes he has edited and published will be regarded as a loving memorial to his name.

When Benjamin Franklin completed what is accepted as the most famous autobiography in American Letters, he added his own epitaph which has become familiar to millions. With apologies to him, we would like to carve, (with a few minor changes) this same epitaph in our memory, and dedicate it to that estimable and truly



admirable Salesian whose editorial labors have given us the lasting pleasure of reading the *Biographical Memoirs*:

### Epitaph

**The body of Father Diego Borgatello,  
Like the cover of an old book,  
Its contents torn out  
And stripped of its lettering and gilding  
Lies here.  
But the work will not be wholly lost:  
For it will, as he believed, appear once more,  
In a new and more perfect edition  
Corrected and amended by the Author.**

*Farewell, dear friend, Michael Ribotta*

Father Paul Aronica, who worked with Father Diego on the editing committee for the *Memoirs*, adds these reflections:

Father Diego came to Newton in 1937 and became catechist of the community. I recall him as a very strict superior, more interested in the rules than in the persons concerned. But this is the "early" Father Borgatello. It is very different from the Borgatello we have come to know and respect. The "habits" of punctuality, of exactness, of neatness, of preciseness were always his and he never lost them. They were the marks of his teaching.

When Father Penna decided it was time for the *Memoirs* to be translated into English, he asked Father Borgatello to begin the task. Father accepted and began work immediately. The first volume of his work is number eleven. In 1963, he began this work as a full-time project and became editor-in-chief.

His work as editor cannot be exaggerated, nor should it be neglected. He was skilled, and he was careful. He selected the material to be translated, and he asked that it be translated into good readable English. He emphasized that it be primarily correct, and some of the expressions he labored over intensely, until he got the correct meaning. Using a variety of books, he struggled to get the correct dates, the proper name of each person mentioned, his titles and position. How he succeeded is, in a sense, miraculous. In addition, he added a biography of each important Salesian.

It is so unfortunate his death came too soon. He had the last two

chapters of volume 16 to go. His care and dedication to Don Bosco's *Memoirs* cannot be forgotten.

Father Paul Avallone offers these reflections in memory of Father Diego:

In 1937, the year of his ordination, Fr. Borgatello was assigned as catechist of Don Bosco College and Seminary. His responsibility included the liturgical life of the community and care of the sick; he was also on the teaching staff. His insistence and concern for the sacred ceremonies remain proverbial among those who were at Newton during those early years. He encouraged the students to understand and appreciate the sacramental and liturgical life. He inspired love for the liturgy and for the care of the chapel which in those days was really the heart of the community.

The same can be said about his deep concern for the physical well-being of the community. Those who were in the infirmary found in him a kind and fatherly concern. He was faithful in following the doctor's orders; he saw to it that no one returned to the seminary's routine unless he was fully recovered.

Later Father Diego moved into administration, a position he held for many years in various communities and schools. He carried with him the same concern and care and dedication. We all remember his great insistence on "preventive maintenance" --this program helped keep the finances sound. The needs of all were attended to; he had great concern that balanced meals were served. Those of us who had him later as "prefect" in Newton recall the great "feastdays" he prepared for the community.

Finally, I too would like to pay tribute to Fr. Borgatello's unforgettable contribution to the English-speaking world through the translation of *The Biographical Memoirs*. Thirty years of painstaking efforts to present us with the Salesian charism as found in the life and history of our Founder. Today the Church asks all religious to go back to the original founding charism and develop it. We are grateful to Father Diego for making this possible through his labor of love.

The local parish, Holy Name Church, had this memento in the parish bulletin as a tribute to Father Diego:

If any priest epitomized the gentle love and faithful care of St. John Bosco, the Patron of Youth, it was Father Diego... While his ministry was the translation of the works of Don Bosco, the founder

of the Salesian Order to which he belonged, Father devoted hours to the youth of our parish and neighborhood. He took them on trips, kept in contact with them on the telephone, sent cards for their birthday and always assured them of a "welcome" at his office at the Salesian Provincial House... A contingent of the young men he befriended, along with many of their parents, attended his Mass of Christian burial on April 26th... May Father Diego rest in Peace!

Father Diego left this message for his brothers and relatives:

Messaggio per i miei due fratelli (Primo ed Ottavio), le mie care cugine e cugini e rispettive famiglie:

Un caro saluto a voi tutti. L'infinita misericordia di Dio ci conceda di essere nuovamente insieme in Paradiso. Grazie per i vostro costante affetto.  
Don Diego.

And to his confreres:

To all my confreres East & West (provincial house especially):

Forgive me if I caused you any hurt and pray for me. Through God's infinite mercy may we all meet again in heaven.

God bless you all!

Your confrere, Fr. Diego.

My dear Confreres, pray to our Blessed Mother, Help of Christians, who had such a significant role in Father Diego's life, to send many vocations like him to our Congregation. Pray also for this community so that it can continue its mission of leadership, animation and support of this province's activities.

Fraternally in Don Bosco,  
Rev. Donald Zarkoski, S.D.B.  
Director

**Data for Necrology:**

**Father Diego Borgatello, born January 5, 1911, Vercelli Italy. Died at New Rochelle, New York, U.S.A., April 23, 1994, at the age of 83 after 66 years of religious profession and 57 years of priesthood.**