



SALESIAN COLLEGE,
BATTERSEA,
LONDON, S.W.11

July 14th, 1944

My dear Confrères,

In the evening of March 9th, 1944, the Angel of Death came quietly and lovingly to take to God the soul of

William Dominic Brownrigg, Priest

Aged 82

He was born in Dublin on July 6th, 1861, his parents being John Brownrigg and Mary Anne (née Hackney), who early instilled into the boy those fine, solid Christian principles which are the characteristics of the Irish wherever they may be found. All his life, this early training was manifest in Father Brownrigg; he always seemed to have so firm and so clear a grasp of the principles involved, and since it was his delight to keep himself abreast, not only of theological thought, but also of philosophical studies, he was, even in extreme old age, a formidable controversial opponent and a force to be reckoned with in any intellectual discussion.

His early training and bright intelligence, coupled with his undoubted piety, led him to the religious life and to the teaching profession. He joined the Christian Brothers and spent some years in their schools. But the desire for even greater things urged him, even at an age when it is usual to settle down to a life's work, to test his vocation for the sacred priesthood. Shortly before his 36th birthday, he got into touch with the Very Rev. C. B. Macey, who was then Rector of the first Salesian House in England, at Battersea, London, and was received by him there on June 25th, 1897. Father Macey found him to be a humble, keen and willing worker and allowed him to enter the Novitiate on October 1st of the same year. He received the religious habit from Father Macey on November 4th and made his first profession at the end of the novitiate year. Owing to his age, the newly professed cleric was allowed to commence his Theological studies immediately. He made his Perpetual Profession on February 4th, 1900, and the great and happy day of his priestly ordination came on September 21st, 1901, at the College of the St. Joseph's Foreign Missionary Society at Mill Hill.

The new priest's already wide experience, mature, balanced judgment and wide sympathy of outlook made him the ideal for an office which he was destined to fill in several places — that of parish-priest. Accordingly, in 1902, Father Brownrigg was appointed parish-priest of Chertsey, where the Salesians had recently purchased property adjoining the present Convent. While at Chertsey, Father Brownrigg had a great deal to do in the widely scattered parish and many of the stories he loved to tell in later years were of his work there.

But his period of duty there lasted only eighteen months, when he was given the even more arduous task of opening an entirely new mission at Earlsfield, South London. He spent several years of hard but successful pioneer work in this growing industrial district and when the parish was eventually handed over to the diocesan clergy, it had been well and truly founded on a solid basis.

In the year 1907, Father Brownrigg was appointed Rector of the Salesian House at East Hill, Wandsworth, where he remained up to and throughout the world war of 1914-18 and where he became even better known among the clergy and people of South London. But the year 1919 saw an end to his work in the capital; he was transferred in that year to the newly opened Salesian School at Pallaskenry, Limerick. It must indeed have been a great joy to return to his native country, where he remained for the next five years until he was again recalled to take up parochial duties at Cowley, Oxford. In 1925, Father Brownrigg became parish-priest of this rapidly expanding district to which a great number of workers, many from the Catholic North, were flocking to find employment in the huge motor-car and steel works then being opened in the neighbourhood.

During his period of office as parish-priest, the Cowley House was the main Training House of the Province, through which passed Aspirants, Novices, and the Philosophical and University Students. Hence Father Brownrigg became known and loved by all the rising generations of Salesians. His work for them in the confessional was deeply appreciated. His sermons and talks were always looked forward to with eagerness, for they invariably contained original thought, clearly and vigorously expressed in an inimitable style. But he was no innovator; behind all his originality was a deep and simple spirituality and solid principles of Faith and reason.

Perhaps one of the greatest lessons of his life to the young students was given by his zeal and spirit of work. He was already an old man, almost reaching the allotted span during the last years of his work at Cowley; but he never seemed to permit himself any respite in his labours or to beg any additional rest or comfort because of his age. It is a remarkable fact that, the better to get round his large parish, he actually learned to ride a bicycle at the age of 65 and continued to use the machine until his 79th year. Such was his zeal and vigour; indeed one might say of Father Brownrigg, such was his perpetual youth.

Another characteristic of this holy priest was his love for little children. In his parochial work he always showed the greatest patience and kindness in his dealings with them. He was an uncompromising warrior for their rights in education and social welfare, as he showed when he was for some years a member of the Town Council at Cowley. It was chiefly his anxiety for the welfare of the children that made him well-known as a tireless worker for social improvements, housing and educational projects in the Oxford district. It was often said that he was "a real parish-priest, a father to his people."

In the last months of 1929, continued ill-health advised a change of climate and surroundings, and accordingly Father Brownrigg was appointed to the Salesian Agricultural School at Warrenstown, Co. Meath, Eire, where he very zealously and faithfully fulfilled the duties of Confessor. While at the School, he was always most ready and willing to render any assistance in his power, and an instance of this is his most successful coaching of a young student for his first year philosophical studies. Although he was nearly 73 at the time, the admirable clarity of Father Brownrigg's mind was in no way dimmed, a fact which the student fully recognised and appreciated during his subsequent studies in the Philosophate.

After spending five years at Warrenstown, the old priest's zeal and vigour was such that he very willingly crossed the water once more to assist in the parochial work at Cowley, which was rapidly becoming a large and flourishing parish. Both Salesians and parishioners were delighted to have Father Brownrigg back amongst them, and he continued to exercise all the gifts of his ministry in the Confessional and in the pulpit, to the great spiritual benefit of those for whom he so cheerfully and devotedly laboured.

When the present world war broke out in 1939, Father Brownrigg continued his work in the parish and for the Cowley community for the greater part of the first year; but as he was now in his 79th year and his health was once more beginning to fail, the Superiors did not wish to expose him to the hardships of war if other arrangements could be made. They therefore thought it advisable to ask him to return to Warrenstown, which he did in 1940, there to do what he could as Confessor for the Community, who received him with the warmest of welcomes.

While at Warrenstown, in the scene of his former labours, he was the subject of the greatest edification to the Community. Though in failing health, he was exact in never omitting his daily Mass, unless absolutely forced to do so through real illness. It was indeed most edifying to see this aged warrior of so many battles in the Lord's service, walking to the altar each morning with halting steps and going through the Holy Mass with difficulty yet with the deepest piety and reverence for the august Sacrifice.

A young priest, speaking of these last years of Father Brownrigg's life at Warrenstown, said recently: "He was one of the most priestly-minded men I know. I took a daily walk with him for two years at Warrenstown and every walk was a lesson; in fact, I can honestly say that in those walks with Father Brownrigg, I learnt more of the dignity, grandeur and ideals of the priesthood than I learnt during my Theology Course of four years. He was indeed a grand and holy priest."

Father Brownrigg's eager will and strong constitution helped him continually to triumph over his periods of ill-health, and it was not until the winter of 1943-44 that he began definitely to fail to any marked degree. I feel I cannot do better than to quote from the letter which the Rector of the House at Warrenstown, the Very Rev. Father McElligott, sent me at the time of Father Brownrigg's death:

"I am now able at last to give you a brief account of the last illness and death of our dear and venerable Father Brownrigg. It is now some seven or eight weeks since he began to become somewhat noticeably unwell. He was getting sleepless nights but was able to take his food fairly well. He had a few visits from a doctor in Trim at his own wish. He did not, however, improve; rather he grew more nervous and eventually a confrère had to sit up with him at night. This condition continued for some days, and then, by agreement with him we asked our own doctor to see him and he advised us to anoint him, as the Father's condition

at his age was serious. After the anointing, every prayer and ceremony of which the good Father followed most devoutly and attentively, he addressed the confrères who were present in these words: 'Dear Confrères, I thank you for your attendance and prayers. And now, I don't ask for life, nor do I ask for death — I am resigned to God's holy Will.' The next day he received Holy Viaticum.

"In the meantime arrangements had been made to transfer him to hospital and he was taken to the private section of the Mater Infirmorum Hospital, Dublin, and placed under the care of a specialist. But the good old priest could not settle down in hospital, and the very next day he asked to be taken out again. But as he was anxious to be X-rayed we managed to persuade him to remain in hospital until the X-ray could be taken. He agreed to this and his stay in the hospital actually amounted to ten days. We then took him back to Warrenstown where he continued to receive the best attention we could give him.

"Unfortunately he grew slowly weaker and it was becoming fairly clear that God intended to call him to Himself. In the afternoon of March 9th, his condition became very grave and he was again given the Viaticum and this time also the last Blessing. He was fully conscious during all this. As the evening wore on, he began to sink and it was evident that the good and dear priest was dying. The Community were assembled in his room and the boys were taken to the chapel. A final Absolution was given and the prayers for the dying recited, and, as they were being completed, the good Father passed away most peacefully without the slightest outward sign of pain — he simply stopped breathing. This was about 7.30 p.m.

"Subsequently, in talking to the boys after night prayers and describing to them the manner of Father Brownrigg's death, the most appropriate illustration that I could think of was to liken it to the dying away of the toll of a bell in the atmosphere. Indeed as far as it is given to us to know, I can say that Father Brownrigg had a most peaceful, most happy and most holy death. He had the grace of receiving fully and consciously (with the possible exception of the prayers for the dying) all the rites and prayers which our holy Mother the Church prescribes for her children at death — a fitting end to an exemplary religious and priestly life. Personally, I have no doubt that the soul of this saintly priest is already in Heaven.

There is little that need be added to this beautiful and consoling account of the death of a grand priest of God. Father Brownrigg had truly fought a long battle for souls, and fought it as a priest and a religious should. We who are left can only pray to God that we too, at the end, may be able to look back, as he could, upon a lifetime of fruitful labour in the Lord's vineyard. We know that this good and gifted priest was a man of deep, simple spirituality and we know that his work must have earned great merits before God; but let not our charity be a blind charity, anticipating, perhaps, the Will of God. Let us pray for the eternal repose of this priestly soul, especially in our Holy Masses and Communion, certain though we all feel that the soul of such a man of God is already enjoying the eternal bliss that God has promised and will certainly give, to those who love Him.

Yours very devotedly in C.J.,

F. V. COUCHE, S.C.(Provincial).

Data for Necrology. — Father WILLIAM DOMINIC BROWNRIGG, of Dublin, Ireland, died at Warrenstown, Drumree, Ireland, on March 9th, 1944, in the 83rd year of his life, the 46th year of his religious profession, and the 43rd of Priesthood. He was a rector for 12 years.