



**Fr. William Lawrence Byrne, S.D.B.**  
**(1908-1987)**



**In the footsteps of  
Fathers Oreste Trinchieri,  
Charles Redahan and Mr. Angelo Fusco  
A 15-Year Remembrance**

## Early Days

William Lawrence Byrne was born August 24, 1908, in St. Paul, Minnesota, the son of an Irish father and an English mother. He was the first-born. Two brothers, Bill and Joseph, and a sister, Julia, followed. His mother died when he was 10, and he was forced to head up the family, while his dad worked long hours as an accountant.

At age 15 he went to Cretin High School in St. Paul, a military academy (1923-1927). It was there that he discovered his vocation to the priesthood. He asked admission and was accepted in the St. Paul Seminary (1927-1934). During a summer camp season he worked for boys and heard stories about Don Bosco.



Fr. Larry with his sister, Julia Cerney, and his brother, Bill.

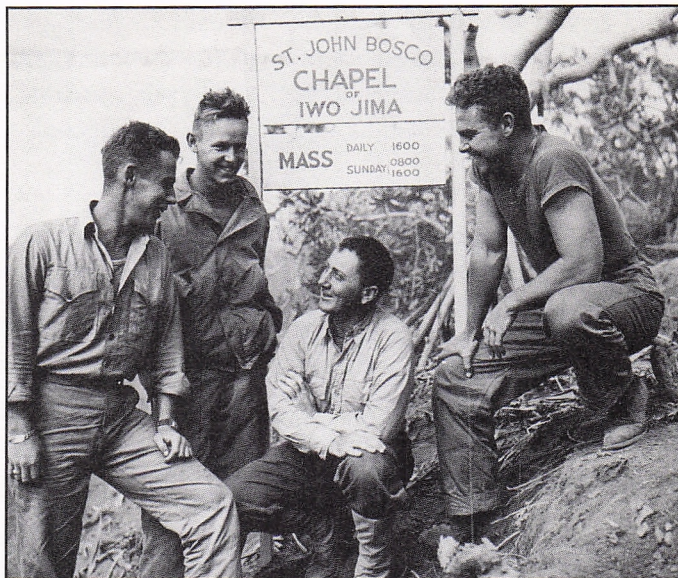
## With the Salesians

Larry writes: “I went home after the camp experience and asked my assistant pastor, ‘Did you ever hear of a saint named St. John Bosco?’ He looked surprised, and he said, ‘That’s the book I’m reading now, *The Blessed Friend of Youth*, by Neil Boyton.’ He gave it to me. I took it home and read it and came back that same night and said, ‘Gee, this is for me.’ Forget the OMI, forget the bishop from Washington—I wanted to join this Order! I asked how I could contact the Salesians. He said, ‘That’s easy, my cousin is Fr. William Ryan. He’s a Salesian in San Francisco.’ And so he made the contact, and that’s how I became a Salesian.” Larry was directed to go to Watsonville, Calif. where the Salesians operated a school for boys. Fr. Larry writes: “Well, everything I found when I got there was delightful. Priests working with kids is where I went; and they really work with kids ... I have learnt a lot about Salesian life here.”

Fr. Larry entered the novitiate (1935-1936) in Newton, NJ. After his first profession on September 8, he went to Richmond for three years (1936-1939) as teacher of the young seminarians. He took his final vows on September 8, 1939. He writes: “I was supposed to go to Italy to study theology, but on the way east, the war broke out. I got as far as Minnesota. The *Athenia* was sunk and all passports were recalled and I was never allowed out of the country. So I went to Newton for my theology, and was ordained a priest on June 7, 1941—one hundred years after St. John Bosco’s ordination—in the cathedral of Paterson, NJ, by Bishop Thomas McLaughlin.”

## His Priestly Apostolate

Returning to California he was assigned to St. John Bosco School in Bellflower. The school was in its second year of operation and had both boarders and day students. He taught there for two years (1941-1943). He then applied and was accepted as Chaplain to the US Navy. He asked to be transferred to the Marine Corps and spent all his active duty with the Marines. While in training as a chaplain on Long Island he had many interesting side experiences with hundreds of kids in the neighborhood, some of whom became Salesians.



Fr. Larry with young marines outside St. John Bosco Chapel, Iwo Jima, 1945.

He lived through many battles in the Pacific. One day in February 1945, after weeks of zigzagging across the ocean on a LST, Fr. Larry landed with the invading Marines in one of history's bloodiest operations: Iwo Jima. He remembered a seemingly endless period of fighting for the 3500 yard beach—during which a chaplain's job was equally endless and heart-rending. He heard someone saying: "The flag's at the top of Suribachi." It was D-Day plus 4 on February 23, 1945. San Francisco photographer Joe Rosenthal had just used 1/400 of a second to record a picture that has become a classic. But at the time Fr. Larry remembered looking up at the distant flag, from his foxhole, and thinking "That means the danger's removed from our rear."

From Iwo Jima Chaplain Byrne was sent to a rest camp on Guam, and then to Japan with the Fifth Marine Division, and to the Marine Corps Base at San Diego where he was discharged (1946). In his short memoirs he wrote: "I did not want to be a chaplain if it was going to be at a big base where it was like a parish. I wanted to be with kids. So when I came back, I was sent to Salesian Boys Club in San Francisco. At Salesian Boys Club I took up the life, which I now find very interesting—working with young people, and in the course of this I also was given the opportunity of working for vocations."

In 1954 Fr. Larry was given the definite assignment as associate pastor of SS. Peter and Paul Church and Administrative Director of the Salesian Boys Club, and immediately assumed the task of serving the youth of San Francisco. He worked with the late Angelo Fusco until Fusco's death in 1955, and then joined efforts with Fred Scolari when he was appointed Executive Director.

Fr. Larry worked at the boys club for over 35 years and literally “touched” thousands of boys. Russ Gumina, the present Executive Director of the Club, says that he never met a man more devoted to working with young people.

He never grew tired of being “with his boys” and lived his entire adult life working on their behalf. He was a true Salesian in every sense of the word.



**Fr. Larry talking to the kids at summer camp in Middletown.**

### **Vocation Director**

When Fr. Larry was asked if he was “given a choice” to be vocation director, he wrote, “Actually I wasn’t given the opportunity. I had found that there was no Vocation Director in the Province, and so while being in charge of the youth work of the Salesian Boys Club, I just began to do the work as Vocation Director on my own, and did it for some fifteen years before I was finally given the official title to be Vocation Director. I worked at that because I could see the great need, and the great joy of being a Salesian priest, and I wanted to share that with others. I think this is one of the things that we very often forget, that if someone really likes his life and likes the work he is doing, he wants to share it with other people. And I think that a Salesian who is really imbued with the ideals of this life and with the beauty of the Salesian apostolate, is going to want to reach out and find the kids who can follow him and do the same sort of thing. To my mind the Vocation Director is the one who wants to let others share his own happiness of being a Salesian. Vocation work is one of the great obligations of every Salesian.”



**Fr. Larry en route to the June 12, 1954 canonization of Dominic Savio with seminarians and friends.**

Fr. Larry went out to talk to schools; in Minnesota four or five times, and in Catholic schools in California wherever he was permitted. He held retreats, trips to Disneyland, Don Bosco contests in Richmond and Youth Leadership Forums at Don Bosco Tech and whatever he could do to get young people involved in vocation discernment. The result was that many of these youngsters were drawn to join the Salesian life.



**Fr. Larry spoke to hundreds of young people like these from Salesian School, 1946, on Don Bosco and religious vocations.**

“Show them how interesting Salesian life is, bring them into contact with the other Salesians and vocations come” he would say. The youth retreats at St. Francis School, Watsonville, became famous in the fifties, when two or three bus loads of 7th and 8th grade boys gathered from many schools in the Bay area made the trek to the Monterey Bay for the occasion. Many of these boys entered the Salesian Junior Seminary in Richmond, and, later, St. Francis High School seminary in Watsonville. He was a real missionary of youth.

On September 29, 1955 a testimonial honoring Fr. Larry for 10 years of youth work in North Beach was held by the Salesian Boys Club of SS. Peter and Paul Church in San Francisco. The Hon. John B. Molinari was Master of Ceremonies and Hon. Joseph L. Alioto speaker of the evening.

Bill Simons, member of the Board of Directors, sums up Fr. Larry's activity in these ten years: “Innumerable times every day you can hear that affectionally possessive clamor from voices ranging from childish trebles through uncertain teen-age timbres, the voices belonging to the seeming endless throngs of kids who regard—and rightly so—the rambling facilities of the Salesian Boys Club as their own.

“And always responding to the cry is an Irish-faced, five and a half-foot, 159 pound prelate, a former marine chaplain, with the name of Fr. William Lawrence Byrne, SDB.

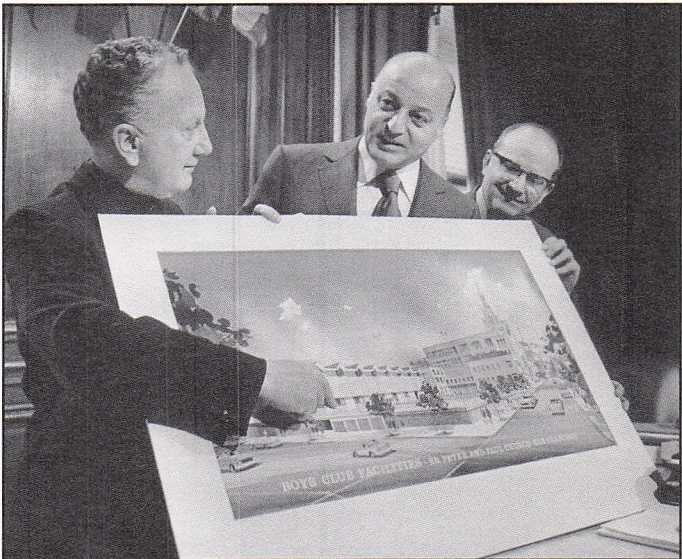
“There is a very simple explanation for the obvious affinity that exists between the diminutive priest and his hordes of youngsters. Like the saintly Don Bosco—in whose footsteps he has followed ever since his ordination 14 years ago—Fr. Larry ‘likes kids.’ And like the great saint, Fr. Larry



**One of Fr. Larry's most effective tools in vocation ministry was the Youth Forums which he sponsored in the 60s.**

to be effective in youth work 'you have to show the kids you like them.'

"During the past ten years that Fr. Larry has served as administrative director of the Salesian Boys' Club, he has become an integral part of the famed North Beach youth plant that has grown under the spires of SS. Peter and Paul Church. Assisted by the Club's able, affable and popular director, Angelo A. Fusco—for whom the kids have another cry, incidentally, also heard with resounding regularity around the Salesian bailiwick: "Hey, Fusco!"—Fr. Larry has the day-in-day-out job of keeping his many charges interested and out of mischief. As 'frosting' for the year round



**Fr. Larry, Mayor Joseph Alioto and Dr. Victor Bonfilio plan for the new Salesian Boys Club.**

program he supervises a series of outings, snow trips, summer camps and other special activities.

"Tonight's Testimonial is the district's way of saying, 'Thanks, Father for the past 10 years. We hope to have you with us many, many more.'"

Another important tribute given to Fr. Larry was held at the San Francisco Hilton on June 2, 1966 celebrating his Silver Jubilee of ordination.

The Master of Ceremonies for this occasion was Victor P. Bonfilio, MD, first vice-president of the Salesian Boys and Girls Club; among those attending were the Most Rev. Joseph T. McGucken, Archbishop of San Francisco and Fr. Joseph Costanzo, SDB, pastor of SS. Peter & Paul Church. A tribute was given by Mayor Joseph L. Alioto, and the thanksgiving prayer given by Rev. John Malloy, SDB, Salesian provincial and current (2002) pastor of SS. Peter & Paul.



**The Superior General's visit to the Club in 1955. (left to right) Fr. Larry, Fr. Joseph Costanzo, pastor, Fr. Renato Ziggotti, Fr. John Malloy, provincial and Angelo Fusco, director of the Club.**



**Russell Gumina, current director of Salesian Boys and Girls Club, congratulates Fr. Larry on the occasion of his 25th anniversary of priestly ordination. June 2, 1966.**



**Fr. Larry was very proud of his service in the Marines during the war and in the Reserves. He frequently took club members to Marine and Navy facilities.**

The printed program contained the following true characterization of Fr. Larry's personality:

*"The only predictable quality about him is that everybody calls him 'Father Larry.' He's short, but stands a mile high, and he's tough. His happy face and quick smile quickly belie the severity of his cleric's cloth. He's always busy, never in a hurry; he's keen-witted in conversation, tenacious in argument, precise in language, and quick-tempered*

*"He loves God with all his heart and with all his soul, by his unabashed devotion to life and creation, and his respect for the dignity of man. In each boy, his mission in life, he sees the love of God, and through him returns that love to Him. Recently, as usual, he has been dreaming big and working hard; this time, with film producers and actors in the supervision of the new Salesian vocation film. He is also vocation coordinator for the Western Salesian Province. And he's been up to his neck in the 'topless' controversy (in San Francisco). And a few others. And somebody just sold him a boat.*

*"In the confessional, at the altar of Sacrifice, at night prayers, in his talks, he is disciplined and ordered, deliberate and supremely concerned in bringing the Way, the Truth and the Life, in a manner that is relevant to each one who listens. For those who do not come to Christ, he brings his word into their homes with gifts at Christmas and Thanksgiving, into their games by joining them, and into their work by finding them employment when out of a job.*

*"His world is the world of boys: basketball, rock 'n roll, sweatshirts, bandages, milk shakes, ski-trips, camping and swimming; telling true stories and tall tales of the South Pacific; repairing bruised egos, and heart-to-heart talks. His world is the world of men: World War II Marine Combat Chaplain, administrative director of the Salesian Boys Club, concerned citizen and active civic leader; conferences with school teachers, youth workers, judges and other community leaders.*

*"No saint has a more devoted enthusiast than does Saint John Bosco in Fr. Larry. A firm believer in Don Bosco's Preventive Method for guiding youngsters, he is consistently in the 'thick of things' with boys, so much so that if there is a characteristic image of him, it is not unlike the traditional paintings of Saint John Bosco surrounded by boys."*

### Correspondent in Vietnam



**Fr. Larry at Vung Tau air strip, Vietnam, in 1967.**

In 1967 Fr. Larry was asked by the Archdiocese of San Francisco to become special **Monitor** correspondent to Vietnam during the Vietnam War. He reported regularly during the two years of his visits to Vietnam.

He also served four years in the diocesan Senate of priests as representative-at-large for Religious. As an advocate for laity and youth he wrote in one report to the Council: "I feel that our position on the Council should be somewhat subsidiary, for the greatest accomplish-



**Fr. Larry with students of theology from Salesian College, Aptos, preparing for a youth forum session.**

ment is to provide an incentive and medium for the representatives of the laity to channel views and advice to the Archbishop. The Council will achieve its maximum influence when we Religious members persuade the laity to take over leadership roles in committee and in floor debates."



**Fr. Larry dedicated his life to the service of young people in the shadows of SS. Peter and Paul from 1946 to 1980.**





**Fr. Larry and Dr. Robert Wall, Larry's close friend and physician, at a visit to USF from St. Anne's Home.**

## **Fr. Larry's Last Days**

He left the Club in 1980 and went as Director of St. Mary's School in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The cold weather there did not help his already worn out body. In 1981 he retired. He spent one year at the Don Bosco Technical Institute in Rosemead, and then two years at Salesian High School, Richmond. In 1984, stricken with Parkinson's disease, he became a resident of St. Anne's Home in San Francisco, Calif.

Father Larry lived at St. Anne's Home in San Francisco in declining health from 1984 until 1987. Present with Fr. Larry in his last moments were two priests and several Little Sisters of the Poor who administer the Home.

Funeral services were held at SS. Peter & Paul Church, San Francisco with a Rosary service on Wednesday, July 15th at 7:30 p.m. and Mass of Christian Burial on Thursday, July 16 at 10:15 a.m. Monsignor Leo Neudecker from St. Paul, Minnesota, gave the eulogy. Burial was at the Salesian Seminary, Richmond, California.

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## **Some Tributes to Father Larry**

### **Archbishop John R. Quinn**

On receiving notice of Fr. Larry's death Archbishop John R. Quinn of San Francisco wrote to Fr. Thomas Prendiville, Provincial: *"I deeply admired the spirit of resignation with which Father Byrne accepted his illness. I would like also to express my most sincere thanks on behalf of the Archdiocese of San Francisco for the many years of loving, caring, and dedicated service which Father Byrne gave in this Archdiocese."*

### **Fred Scolari**

The Executive Director of the Salesian Boys and Girls Club had this to say as he announced to the Club members the death of Fr. Larry:

*“Fr. Larry was the primary reason the Salesian Boys Club has flourished over the past forty years. He was a devoted friend of all of us, especially the boys of the club. It would be a tremendous thing if we filled the church as one last show of affection for our friend.”*

**Fr. Thomas Prendiville**

Fr. Thomas Prendiville, provincial, said that *“Fr. Larry will always be remembered for his dedication to young people in the tradition of Frs. R. Piperni, B. Redahan, and O. Trinchieri at Salesian Boys Club, SS. Peter & Paul. He was Vocation Director in an age when the position was new and untried. Pray that Fr. Larry is now enjoying the reward of a faithful servant.”*

**Russell J. Gumina**

*“It is with great sadness,”* wrote Russell Gumina, Executive Director of the Salesian Boys and Girls of San Francisco, *“that I report to you on the passing of our beloved Fr. Larry Byrne. Father Larry was called to his final reward on the morning of July 13, 1987 after a prolonged bout with Parkinson's disease. And even though his death will be hailed as a blessing by many, I can't help but feel a sense of eeriness by his demise. Those of us that had the good fortune to know Father Larry, know what a truly great man he was. His death marks the end of an era in the history of the Salesian Boys Club that will be unparalleled.”* July 14, 1987.

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Father Larry very frequently corresponded with Father Ambrose Rossi, his provincial during the time of his early Salesian training. In 1941 Fr. Rossi had completed his term of office and was reassigned to Latin America. In the last letter from New Rochelle, dated August 14, 1941, Fr. Rossi replied to Fr. Larry, who after his ordination of June 1941 was teaching at St. John Bosco School, Bellflower. Apparently Fr. Larry had asked for some last souvenir. Fr. Rossi wrote:

“My dear Fr. Larry. For the cordial intimacy with which we were connected all these years, I take the liberty to give you a kind of a spiritual souvenir:

“1st) Be always faithful to the principles and teachings imparted to you in the house of your formation.

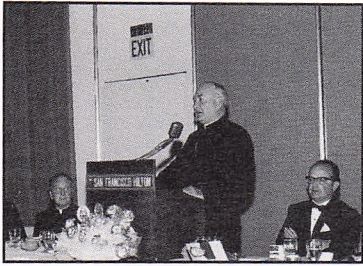
“2nd) Always cherish a deep and strong attachment to our Major Superiors and your directors.

“3rd) Perseveringly work to acquire piety and humility, which will make you a priest after Don Bosco's heart.”

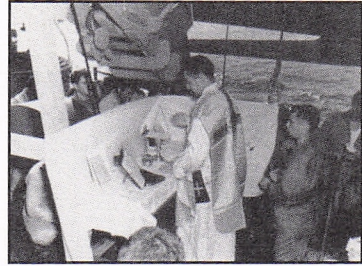
I believe Fr. Larry carried out to the end of his life these recommendations and this made him a very special person, an enthusiastic Salesian, revered and loved by all who came in contact with him.

**Fr. Mario Mich**

Province Archivist



Archbishop McGucken speaks at 25th anniversary dinner



Fr. Larry celebrating Mass aboard L.S.T. landing craft approaching Iwo Jima with 5th division U. S. Marine Corps prior to battle (1945)



Youth Forum at St. John Bosco High School, 1962



Fr. Eneas Tozzi, provincial, presents award to board member of the Club



Proudly with All Stars in new gymnasium



Br. Larry (2nd from left in top row) with staff of St. Francis School, Watsonville (1935)

**Fr. William Lawrence Byrne, SDB**

Born: St. Paul, Minnesota  
August 24, 1908

First Profession: Newton, New Jersey  
September 8, 1936

Perpetual Profession: Watsonville, CA  
September 8, 1939

Ordination: Paterson, NJ  
June 7, 1941

Died: San Francisco, California  
July 13, 1987



*Salesians of St. John Bosco*

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