

Easter 1967

My dear Confrères in Jesus Christ,

The 10th February is one of Malta's national holidays. It recalls St Paul's shipwreck on the Island, so graphically described in the Acts of the Apostles. But the Salesians of Malta will remember this day for another reason; because it was on the 10th February, 1967, that the good Lord took back to Himself the candid, childlike soul of Brother Alfred Cauchi at the patriarchal age of 95.

He was born on the 21st May, 1871 in Valletta, the city that was founded by the Knights of Malta. His father was John Cauchi, and his mother, Carmela, née Degabriele. He was baptised in the Parish Church of St Dominic by Fr Cousin, O.P. on May 24th. It is only now as I write these lines, that I understand the reason behind his great attachment to Our Lady. 24th May, 1871, the Salesian feast. (In Turin they were celebrating the tercentenary of the Battle of Lepanto). His mother's name, *Carmela*, surely gives us the clue to his lifelong devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel; and his baptism in the church of St Dominic explains why the *Rosary* was his faithful companion.

His father died in 1881 and his mother in 1897. It was just after his father's death, when Alfred was ten years of age, that he started work as a messenger boy in the offices of the "*Portafoglio Maltese*", a newspaper edited by Dr Serafino Debono. He remained there for the next ten years, graduating from compositor to printer, and then joined the staff of the "*Gazzetta di Malta*" under Dr Fortunato Mizzi. This Dr Mizzi was to become one of the leading politicians of Malta.

It was during this period of his life that he first heard of the Salesians. He was now 32, and a Master Printer. The first Salesians, under Fr Patrick O'Grady, had arrived in Malta in 1903, having been invited to the Island by Mr Alphonse Galea. This great Salesian benefactor, while at school in Marseilles in 1878, had paid a visit to the Salesian Oratory of that town, and was so impressed by the work being done for hundreds of boys from poor families, that he wanted to visit Turin and meet Don Bosco. He contacted his parents in Malta, who arranged to meet him in Leghorn, and together they travelled on to Turin, only to receive the disappointing news that Don Bosco himself had left for France the previous week! Years later, in 1897, he again contacted the Salesians and even sent Don Rua a map of the Sliema district on the Island, marking on it the plot of land he was prepared to give the Congregation. The eventual contract between Don Rua and the Government of Malta was not signed till the 9th October, 1902, and one of the witnesses was none other than Dr Fortunato Mizzi, for whom Alfred was still working on the "*Gazzetta di Malta*"!

It was from *Sur Fons*, as he is affectionately known in Malta, that Alfred heard all about the miracle-worker of Turin. He used to tell us that at first he was not prepared to believe some of the things he was told about Don Bosco, but when one day, in the course of a conversation with Mr Galea, he mentioned his desire of entering the religious life, this latter, understandably enough, urged him to join the Salesian Congregation.

At that time, Malta was part of the Sicilian Province, and when the Provincial, Fr Piccolo, was next over on the Island for his canonical visitation, a meeting was arranged by Mr Galea, at which the Rector, Fr O'Grady, was also present. It was decided to send Alfred to Sicily for a year, prior to his novitiate. A note in the Chronicle of the period states simply: January 25th 1904: Mr Alfred Cauchi, an aspirant laybrother, left for Catania.

He spent 1904 working in the press of the Salesian College at Cifali. When the time came for him to start his novitiate, the Rector, a certain Fr Mantelli, refused to let him go, as there was no one to replace him in the Printing Department. We must remember that Alfred Cauchi was 33 years old now, a skilled craftsman, and this failure on the part of his Rector to keep his word, was more than he could bear. He packed his bags and returned to Malta where he was received with open arms by Dr Fortunato Mizzi who was glad to have him back on his staff.

But he could never get the thought of Don Bosco out of his mind. And so, after two rather unhappy years, he again approached Fr O'Grady who admitted him into St Patrick's School. It was the 10th September, 1906.

At the end of October, 1908 he left the Island to start his novitiate at San Benigno Canavese. His Novice Master was Don Canepa, and his Provincial was the celebrated Don Giulio Barberis. He received the medal from the hands of the Servant of God, Don Rua.

During the novitiate he met that intrepid pioneer of the Pampas, Don Vespignani, and volunteered to return with him to South America after his first profession. However, as the work in Malta was progressing, he was asked to return there until such time as he could be replaced. He was destined to remain in this School for the rest of his life!

How can one adequately describe the life of this nonagenarian? As the first Maltese Salesian, no doubt one day a short biography of this humble son of Don Bosco will be printed. For the present I reproduce here part of an "Appreciation" which appeared in one of our daily newspapers:

"Brother Alfred was a jovial, honest and hard-working religious. Hundreds of his past pupils can bear witness to his untiring zeal in instilling into them, not only technical skill and knowledge, but true Christian living. To them all he was a father, a genuine Salesian educator.

"His joviality and sense of humour will long be remembered by his many friends. Though nearing his 96th birthday, he was, to the last day of his life, young at heart. He could always laugh at a good joke, even at his own expense. To a friend who visited him during his last illness and asked him what he did all day in bed, he answered that he spent the time thinking up jokes for his next birthday!

"But above all Bro. Alfred was a good religious in the full sense of the word. His dedication to work, his scrupulous honesty, his deep piety are not qualities for us to eulogize upon, but they are virtues for which Almighty God must have already given him a just reward. They are, likewise, an inspiration for us who have been left behind, for he was a model worthy of imitation".

For myself, as one who lived with him only during the last five years of his life, I feel I can apply to him those words of Cardinal Cagliero. You will remember the incident. It was in June, 1916 and this first Salesian Cardinal had just arrived from Rome. He was surrounded by many confrères and boys; and as they stood in the piazza they began to talk about the future monument to Don Bosco which would one day be erected there. At that moment a white-haired, bent old man emerged from the porter's lodge. The Cardinal, pointing in his direction, said: "There, my friends, is the real monument to Don Bosco". It was Marcello Rossi, the evergreen laybrother who was the Oratory's porter for 48 years. "Yes", continued the Cardinal, "Don Bosco will best be remembered for two special characteristics: the Preventive System and the Salesian Coadjutor. And Marcello Rossi embodies both of them".

Brother Alfred spent the last few months of his life in hospital, bravely trying to walk again after a stroke. But for a man of his age, the effort was too much. The end, when it came, was sudden. He had been sitting up in a chair all morning and had just finished his lunch, when he asked the nurse to put him back into bed as he felt tired. The good nun sensed there was something wrong and immediately sent for the hospital chaplain. She then phoned me at the School and told me she thought he was dying. I was at the hospital in a matter of minutes and entered the room as he was closing his eyes in the sleep of the Lord.

The funeral took place the following day, the feast of the Apparition of Our Lady at Lourdes. The preacher reminded the congregation of the last moments of Don Bosco's own life when he told his boys he would await them in heaven. The coffin remained open till the afternoon and scores of people filed past to pay their last respects to this valiant son of Don Bosco.

Three of our young coadjutors and one past pupil of Brother Alfred carried the coffin the last few yards to the grave. He is buried on top of the casket containing the mortal remains of Fr Patrick McLoughlin with whom he had been associated for so many years.

Please pray for the repose of his soul and for the needs of this School where he will be long remembered.

FR B.J. O'BRIEN  
(Rector)

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#### Dates for the Necrology

*Brother Alfred Cauchi, born in Valletta, Malta 21-5-1871, died in Sliema, Malta 10-2-1967, in the 96th year of his age and 57th of religious profession.*