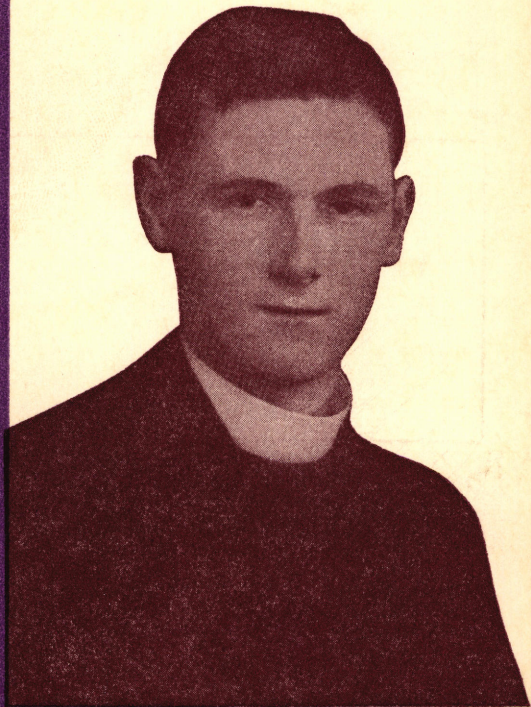


No Greater Love . . .



Life Story of

DENIS M. CAVANAGH, S.D.B.

A young missionary pioneer

By A. F.

To
the Salesian
Aspirants, Novices, Students
of
India, Burma, Ireland, England, U. S. A.

No Greater Love . . .

DENIS MOLAISE CAVANAGH, S.D.B.

The life story of a young missionary pioneer by A. F.

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Cover — *Brother Denis at the age of 19.*

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DENIS MOLAISE CAVANAGH

Salesian of Don Bosco

(1917 - 1944)

An early attraction to a great ideal and a joyous tenacity in fulfilling it — these are the wonders which the short life of Denis Cavanagh leaves in our mind. The memory of him, still cherished by a host of admiring friends, should not be allowed to pass into oblivion.

Early Years

Denis was born at Enniskillen, Ireland on the sixth of September 1917. His mother first instilled the seed of a missionary vocation in him. She did it in her own Irish way by inspiring him with an ardent love of the Sacred Heart. This inspiration was the dominant influence in his life.

His sister Eileen, a Salesian nun, and his brother have supplied us with interesting recollections

of his boyhood. Denis was a lively lad, pleasant, full of fun and keen on games. He had a passion for boating and fishing and was a great favorite among his companions who soon began to look up to him as a leader. Yet underneath these high spirits there was a quiet seriousness which indicated the early workings of Divine Grace in his soul. Mass and other church services soon became his chief attractions. Denis not only loved to serve Mass but he also aroused this same holy desire in others. His sister remembers him teaching the responses to some of his companions whom he gathered together in a sort of altar-boy's club. Many at Enniskillen still remember the gentle, quiet gravity with which Denis carried the cross before the priest during the stations of the cross. Zeal for God's honor was already a part of his spiritual make-up. We are told that he could not bear to see any of his companions misbehaving in church. If any of them would try to speak during a sermon, he would get between them to try to prevent any further talk. His brother remembers hearing from a companion how Denis once "roped" two of his companions into the Holy Family Confraternity. As an inducement he invited them to a football game. They were not at all willing and said they had no football shoes. Denis promised to see to that. He kept his promise and saw to it that they kept theirs

too. In the evening they joined him at the confraternity meeting.

Denis was an active member of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society too. Quite a few still remember his punctual attendance at the meetings and his diligence in visiting the poor on Sunday afternoons to deliver the coal tickets supplied by the Society. Once some of the members objected to the hour of the Sunday meeting. They thought it was "awkward". When Denis was asked for his opinion, he suggested with a sense of humor remarkable in a thirteen-year old. "Perhaps it's an awkward time for awkward people."

At this time he was attending the Presentation Brothers' School. In July of that year, 1931, Father Ciantar, S.D.B. from Shrigley Missionary College happened to be in Enniskillen. He was invited to give a talk to the school about Saint John Bosco and the Salesians. At once Denis offered himself as a candidate for the Salesian priesthood. No surprise was expressed in the family circle; yet there were slight misgivings. Would he withstand the exacting training of a religious society? His father thought that Denis was too young to know his own mind. He consulted Monsignor Tierney about it. "Leave Denis alone. He knows what he is doing." How well

the experienced pastor knew his altar boy. Denis truly knew his own mind. There was never a moment when that first resolution wavered. This is the simple story of his Salesian life.

High School Days at Shrigley

The following September he arrived at Shrigley (England) and spent three full years there. The boy completely fulfilled the expectations of his parish priest. His companions speak of his keenness at studies as well as in games, but it was the earnestness of his piety that struck them most. His superior remembers his quick temper, the reason why Denis' father doubted about his success. Yet the superior adds that Denis strove manfully to master himself. How often in his frequent talks with him would Denis confess with the most admirable candor that his temper had given him the slip on the playing field. He would show his deep sorrow and promise to try hard to conquer himself. His success is proven by the fact that no one is able to recall that he ever passed a cutting remark to anyone.

Denis' desire to become a missionary was well known to all. They still remember his devotion at prayer, especially in the evening when he would make a visit all alone to his favorite shrine of the

Sacred Heart. One who knew him intimately writes: "On the prie-dieu before the statue of the Sacred Heart (the gift of a generous Irish cooperator) there was a printed card with Saint Ignatius' prayer for generosity. It is the one that contains that well known petition, 'Dear Jesus, grant me the grace to suffer and not to count the cost.' It was an open secret among us that as Denis knelt before the statue he asked for a big grace. Can we surmise what it was? Was it merely the grace of the priesthood? I cannot help thinking that Denis' desire to labor and not to count the cost went beyond that."

Nearly all his companions recall his cheerful spirits. On one occasion Denis said to his sister Eileen that the three years that he spent at Shrigley were the happiest years of his life.

Novitiate In Oxford

He left Shrigley for good at the end of July 1934. After a short holiday at home he entered the novitiate at Cowley, Oxford. He felt his parting from home very deeply. His sister, then a novice in the convent at Cowley, writes, "When he came to see me his words almost seemed to betray a regret at having followed his vocation. How quickly the temptation was overcome was proven when my sister

and brother came to see the both of us at Cowley two weeks later. After having visited with them for a short while Denis said, 'Now you needn't come to see me again until you are ready to leave for home.' He wanted them to spend their time with me and was ready to sacrifice their company. I thought that was a very generous act, especially since he was still feeling the separation from his family so keenly. I was told that in the novitiate he always took the work of perfection very much to heart. I remember once how he sent me a little note asking me to say a prayer that he might read the meditation in such a way as to help his companions who had to listen."

As a novice he had his trials though. From a confidence he made to one of his friends we know that he found a job which had been assigned to him very distasteful. "The first thing that flashes across my mind when I wake up is, 'Oh, that job!'" Yet he always did it willingly and even cheerfully. "It is my daily sacrifice for the missions," he confided to the same friend. This will be better understood if it is explained that some of the novices, after the example of the Little Flower, had formed a league to offer up prayers and sacrifices for the missionaries. Denis was the most zealous of them and when in-

terest flagged he would remind them of their promise.

There was one distinctive trait of his religious character which he showed to the very end. This was his simplicity in the way Saint Francis de Sales understood the word. That is to say, a singleness of mind which sees in one's superior the representative of God. From this flowed an unquestioning obedience and, as far as human nature permitted, a true purity of intention. Once a Father was heard to remark about this, "Isn't the brother too simple?" But another who knew Denis well immediately answered, "We don't have to be concerned about Brother Denis' simplicity. He is only putting into practice what his Novice Master taught him."

His observance of the rule was scrupulous and exemplary. Although he gave clear proof that he valued poverty highly he was always neat and tidy in his person. He was excellent at games, especially football. His ready obedience and unruffled serenity evoked this comment from Father Swanzey, his assistant in the novitiate. "I had to be on my guard not to impose on his ready willingness to do the most menial tasks all the time since he was so quick to comply with even the half expressed wish of his superiors. He was perhaps the most keen football play-

er of all the novices yet if the weather or some other cause prevented the usual game he betrayed no signs of disappointment and wholeheartedly entered into whatever arrangements were made.

“During his whole novitiate he aspired to become a missionary. I can well remember that evening, which I am sure must have been the darkest in his life. When his novitiate had been completed it was well known that several of the newly professed were to be sent to the missions. One by one the future apostles were called into the Rector’s office and told where they were to be sent, but Brother Denis was not called. I remember well the two big tears that stood in his eyes as he came to me and with difficulty asked me if I were sure that Father Rector did not want to speak to him also. He simply could not conceive that he was being left out of the group of missionaries. For days he went about looking quite sad and while he never neglected any of his duties he obviously found it hard to accept God’s Will. But God’s mills were grinding and by a disposition of Divine Providence his desire was finally granted.”

Let Father Ingoldsby complete the account. “One morning during class Brother Denis was sent for by the Rector who asked if he would like to go to the missions too. When we met after class he was

so beside himself with joy he could hardly speak."

We cannot be sure that the Superiors' hesitation to send him to the missions was due to their concern for his health, yet some words of Sister Eileen would probably indicate that this was the case. She remembers having seen him once during his novitiate looking quite ill. "Neither then nor afterwards," she writes, "did I learn what was the matter. Denis made no reference to it." Did the generous young novice wring this coveted favor from the Sacred Heart by a bold and persistent prayer? This is, of course, the secret of the King, yet the suggestion cannot be dismissed altogether.

He leaves for India

Brother Denis made his profession on September 11, 1935 and after a brief visit home he proceeded to Turin. Shortly after he sailed for the East and by the end of October he was in the Studentate of Philosophy at Shillong, Assam, India. Of the three years he spent there we know very little. Besides studying philosophy he gave some time to the study of the native languages. In his letters of those days he describes with delight his excursions across the Assam hills and especially to the neighboring villages. Here on weekends the young clerics would make

their first contact with the missionary apostolate by gathering children together to catechise them and entertain them with music and games. Brother Denis contributed a vivid account about one of these "apostolic marches" in an article for "Don Bosco in India". The goal was a village of Marianpur in Bengal.

"Five miles of literally kicking up the dust, and we finally drew near to Marianpur. The original name of this town was Ranabonda, but the Salesian Fathers changed the name to Marianpur after Mary, Help of Christians, who is the patron of their new church. To reach this village we had to stand on a raft built across two boats. In the sunset we glided across to the other side singing the praises of Mary all the while. As we approached the opposite bank, *Jisu mahima*, the welcome cry of the Christians, greeted us. Then a long procession wound its way to the church chanting a solemn Magnificat. The church is still under construction, very bare, with stones and bamboos everywhere. After this we had supper and sang songs for an hour. That night we slept, as well as we could, on the carpets of the church. The next morning we were up at sunrise preparing the church for Mass. Some carpets were nailed to the walls and decorated with garlands. A cup-

board which we covered with altar cloths and an antependium served as an altar. After meditation we knelt for an hour while confessions were being heard. Then we had Mass. The church was packed. Most of our three-hundred and thirty Christians must have been there. It was most impressive to see the devotion of the people and the activity of the catechists."

From Marianpur on the following day the youthful band spread to pay visits to the other villages. "In all these villages we prayed, sang hymns and visited the sick whom Father blessed. Whenever we found a sufficient number of children we improvised entertainments for them."

Commenting on the poverty of these Christians for whom the Catholic Faith is everything in this world Bro. Denis concludes: "Our only regret was that we had to return so soon and we were unable to spend more happy hours with the poor of Christ."

Pioneering in Burma

When his philosophical studies were completed he was on the staff of the new house of philosophy at Sonada for some months. Just at that time the superiors decided to start their first foundation in Burma and Brother Denis was chosen to be one of the

pioneers. There was a touch of romance about this venture and everyone was talking about it. It was regarded as the fulfillment, at least in part, of a prediction of Don Bosco. In 1887 the Saint had seen in one of his mysterious dreams a row of Salesian stations stretching from China to India. He had seen the Salesians from China meeting and shaking hands with the Indian Salesians. In fact Mandalay is one of the great centers on the new road from India to China. It was in this city that the Salesians had been repeatedly asked to begin a foundation. They were to take over an important institution consisting of an orphanage and a large church. It was founded a long time before by Father Lafon, a zealous French Missionary. The enthusiastic pioneers, however, had no idea of the difficulties which were in store for them. It is by far easier to start a new institution than to take over one already existing. In the Lafon School the Salesians found a strange medley of boys and young men. They ranged from eight to twenty years old and represented many different nationalities. For a long time there had ceased to be any classes because of the lack of teachers. During this same time discipline had almost disappeared also. It was a tremendous job to get things to run properly once more. The older boys were accustomed to wander in and out as they liked and they resented

the new discipline. They also stirred up the others against authority. Eventually this problem element worked itself out of the school. Only then did things begin to improve. The rest of the boys settled down to the new routine and became attached to the fathers. Soon a new spirit was evident. After only a year the orphanage could hardly be recognized, so great had been the change. "Now," comments Father Burns, "Don Bosco's name is glorious in Burma and the Salesian Orphanage is the pride of the Catholic community. It has already given many vocations."

But what a tremendous work did this transformation entail. The password given to the staff was, "We must save these unfortunate lads at all costs!" Nothing was to be left untried to win their affection. Every Salesian was asked to give the best of his time, energy and unceasing sympathy. Forbearance was to be stretched to impossible lengths. As we might expect, Brother Denis threw himself into the task with his characteristic, we might almost say, impetuous generosity. At last, he had an opportunity of doing something really worth while for the Sacred Heart. His method would be Don Bosco's method, unsparing zeal and charity. Since he was given charge of the bigger boys his task was exceptionally hard. By night, supervision in the dormitory meant, more of-

ten than not scanty sleep; by day, it meant intense and unceasing activity. If these wild boys were to be kept from moral harm, they were to be kept on the go all the time with unending and interesting work or recreations. Brother Denis took his boys for lessons, walks and organized games. He even joined them playing football under the scorching sun of the Burmese sky!

This swift succession of activities and the leading part which he took in them are reflected in his letters home. "I have been very busy," he wrote on December 29. "We had school inspection from December 2 to December 6. They let nothing pass and examined each and every boy. My pupils came off well on the whole. In geography they answered splendidly. The Inspector showed himself very pleased. As soon as the inspection was over we started preparations for the feast of the Immaculate Conception. It was a terrific rush. We had to prepare everything, ceremonies, sports, recitations, music for the academy and the grounds for the procession. After the big push we arrived in time. The feast began on the eve with the rosary, solemn benediction and a beautiful academy. On the next morning the solemn Mass at 8:30 was followed by the profession of one of our brothers. Then we had sports till 1:00

when dinner followed. In the afternoon the boys had a competition to see which knew all the Salesian prayers best. Two of my pupils were first and third respectively. The second prize was won by a convert. At five o'clock in the evening we had the rosary and the torchlight procession. The path of the procession was made visible by lights fixed in the ground. It was all very romantic in the dark. After the procession we made the consecration to Our Lady. A wonderful spectacle met our eyes as we came out of the church. The whole front of the orphanage and the school was illuminated by lanterns and stars. Before supper all the boys went to the study hall to write their letters to Our Lady. These letters were burnt in front of her statue after supper. Every now and then some incense was poured into the fire; thus both the incense and the petitions in the letters rose to heaven. As soon as the feast ended preparations for the exams began immediately. The exams took place between the eighteenth and the twenty-second — a very busy week in which we hardly had a chance to breathe. Then the preparations for Christmas followed. On the night of the twenty-third Father Bordin and I went to bed at half past eleven. At present I am very busy preparing the examination results for the boys."

Does not the pace of events at Lafon appear excessive? It would seem so. But there was no alternative. Under those circumstances that was the price that had to be paid if keenness and piety were to be maintained in full vigor at the school. Brother Denis was overjoyed at the results. "*Christus vincit!* — Christ conquers!" he exclaimed twice in his letter. And true enough, Christ the King was conquering the hearts of his rough Burmese boys. Unfortunately the school was understaffed and the strain was gradually telling on him. More unfortunate still, the zealous brother could not easily be replaced. One of the most robust Salesians, a coadjutor, had been stricken down at the beginning of the term with typhoid fever. He had been given the Last Sacraments and recovered only by a miracle. Small wonder then if, by the end of the year Brother Denis had a physical breakdown. A frank and timely warning to his superiors about his increasing weakness might have saved his life but Brother Denis saw confreres as overworked as himself and kept quiet. He simply carried on. Was it possible for a young son of Don Bosco to live up to his father's motto more generously, "*Give me souls; nothing else matters.*" Brother Denis promised the Sacred Heart that he would not spare himself in the service of his boys. Never was a promise kept more faithfully. He gave the

last ounce of his strength for his boys, Divine Providence would see to the rest.

As these notes go to press Fr. U. Bordin writes from Burma:

“I knew Brother Denis rather well. We were together for many years but the year 1939 was passed in great intimacy. I was then Cathechist and Prefect of Studies at Mandalay where he was having his practical training. Life was hard at the beginning. We had to sleep on the bare floor as there were no cots...but we didn't mind, we were very happy. Bro. Denis was put in charge of the big boys: these were undisciplined and well known for their aggressiveness. Bro. Denis did his duty scrupulously yet he never irritated the boys. One night at about eleven he called me up and informed me that 4 boys were missing. He had waited for them, had looked all over the place but could not find them. He suspected they had gone to the pictures. We dressed up and went to the only cinema in town, and there we found them in the first row... They did not say a word and came back to the school. He was quite shrewd in his assistance too. We had given strict orders not to keep money. As we were about to enter the office to give the four boys a bit of our mind, Bro. Denis stopped outside for a while. When we had reprimanded

manded the boys and sent them to bed, one of them lingered outside the office and Bro. Denis looked out smiling. Then he told me: "That boy dropped his money and covered it with a bit of dust before entering the office. He thought I did not notice . . . but here it is."

He quickly gained the boys' confidence. Brother Denis played soccer very well and teams vied with one another to have him on their side. He liked to play and be among the boys. And I must say that due to his untiring zeal and that of all the other confreres the moral standard of the school soon changed.

His piety was intense and sincere. You could see from his smile that his soul was pure and pleasing to God. His smile was really winning the hearts of all. I can never forget that peaceful, serene, hearty laugh, the token of a good conscience.

The piety of the boys changed so considerably during that year that the people and even the priests in the town were very surprised, and could not understand how that change had been brought about in such a short time. I am certain that Bro. Denis' example much contributed to that. All of us were full of work during that memorable year, and he had his share. He never complained of being overworked, and carried on till the end, till his body refused to obey his will. The Superior immediately

sent him back to India where he could get better care. During his illness he wrote me some beautiful letters and some little poems, which unfortunately during that time of upset, were lost . . .”

An incident which occurred that year at Mandalay throws further light on the heroic spirit of the young Salesian. There was a man dying of tuberculosis and no priest was available. Brother Denis took it upon himself to prepare the man for his last step and administer holy Baptism himself. “It was imprudent on your part,” a friend remarked in later years. With a smile the young religious replied, “Even if I did sacrifice my life for one soul my life would not have been spent in vain.” Such words would delight the heart of any Roman advocate for a cause of beatification. We have referred to Denis’ simplicity as a boy and a novice. This rich simplicity of his, as Pope Pius XI would have called it, had grown into a wonderful heroism. For if Brother Denis was not a hero what can this word mean?

Long-Suffering with Joy

The rest of his life was to be but a replica of that of the saintly Salesian, Father Andrew Beltra-

mi.* "After a while in the hospital at Mandalay," writes Father Kenny, S.D.B., "Brother Denis returned to India (April 1940). He tried Sonada and Bandel, then finally he came to this house of Shillong, his last home in the Congregation. Wherever he was he received all the treatment and care possible. Arrangements were made to send him to a good sanatorium, but he pleaded to be allowed to remain here at Shillong. His request was granted. For some time he was at the Welsh Mission's Hospital but he felt too unhappy there. His great trial was that he could not receive daily communion there."

Of the months he spent at the house of Sonada he preserved the happiest recollections. Sonada was the novitiate and studentate. For some time previously he had been on the staff of that house. The happy atmosphere of the place was like a tonic to his spirits. The tone of his letters from Sonada is always cheerful and often marked by a quiet humor. "On Monday, August 29, we had a picnic. One of the Novices fell into a stream up to his neck. Another fell thirty feet down a rocky hill and has been in bed for a week with a cut forehead, arms, chest and leg.

* "For the Sake of Thy Words." Life of the Servant of God, Father Andrew Beltrami, S.D.B.

Luckily he was not killed . . .” “This month (September) is the month of Our Lady’s feasts, the eighth, twelfth, fifteenth and twenty-fourth. For each feast we have an academy in her honor in the moonlit garden after supper.” Those who are not acquainted with Salesians traditions need to be told what these *academies* are. They are nothing other than short informal concerts in which poets, musicians and budding orators all contribute a flower of praise and devotion to the Mother of God. Brother Denis always took an active part in these gatherings since he could write verse with ease and sing fairly well. He loved Our Lady with a child-like enthusiasm. Indeed this devotion to her had been largely the *cause of his joy* from his very childhood. This joy was never absent from the thoughtful calm of his countenance, even in his darkest moments. To be the herald of that joy to many Indian children was his great apostolic ambition, for he had come to realize that it was just what they needed. “Here in India,” he once wrote his mother, “there are crowds of children whose smile is not as bright as it could be. Pray hard for them and get others to pray for them too.”

The bracing air of Shillong and a complete rest brought about a noticeable change and improvement in his health. He was able to attend to his theologi-

cal studies and he even did light work to help his busy confreres. But there was never any hope of a substantial recovery. Denis understood that and bowed his head to the will of God. With his usual trust and simplicity he generously offered his life to the Sacred Heart and never retracted this offer. In 1941 he wrote a friend: "God has given me this cross and I bear it willingly for love of Him. I look forward to the day of my ordination with eagerness. God may not grant me this joy. May His holy will be done. My attitude in everything is complete resignation. My motto is generosity in sacrifice. Pray then, dear Father, that I may in all things do the holy will of God. That I may always be a religious after the Sacred Heart of Jesus." From a letter that he writes to his sister we can gather that as far back as 1942, after only one year of illness, his soul was already nearing sublime heights. In this letter the increasing refinement of a soul being slowly purified and mellowed in the crucible of pain is vividly portrayed.

"A new year has begun. For me it must be one of great intensity, of detachment, recollection, union and love. Does not our whole perfection consist in uniting our will to God's will? As Saint Denis says, 'The principal effect of love is to unite the wills of those who love, so as to make them one and the same

will. Hence the greater is our will's uniformity with God's will the greater is our love for Him. "Be generous," he concludes. "Be generous with Our Lord, He is never outdone in love."

But there must have been some moments when the vision was veiled and all seemed dark, when he thought that his life had been a failure after all. Such desolation is the greatest purification that Our Lord reserves for those choice friends whom he invites to share His Gethsemani with Him. However there was never any repining in Brother Denis. He never doubted about God's love for him. The following lines, found among his papers, are a window to his soul.

*"I do not ask that I might comprehend
my present cross.*

*Give me but the strength to bear it patiently
and not to count the loss.*

*One thing I ask, O Lord, and one thing alone,
Give me Thy hand.*

*And when darkness overshadows all
with Thee I'll stand.*

One wonders whether a return to his native Ireland, had war conditions permitted, might not have given the brother a chance of recovery. But how can we even consider Brother Denis anxious or even will-

ing to leave the mission field, his beloved companions and boys, India — the land of his dreams? Had he not offered his life unreservedly for that unhappy land? And now what a difference did it make if that sacrifice was to take the form of an active apostolate or silent suffering? And then in Shillong he could at least live some sort of missionary life. He could follow the labors of the missionaries and share in their joys and sorrows. In 1944 he wrote to his former superior in England, "Pray hard, Father, for our missions and our missionaries who are having such a hard time." "Some of his confreres were interned during the war," notes Father Kenny. "It was Brother Denis who wrote them regularly to keep them cheerful. His memory for their feastdays, anniversaries and so on was simply wonderful." There were also some days when he felt better and strong enough to do some jobs or to spend his recreation watching the boys at their games. Then he would be his former self. He could now relive the happy hours of those bygone days when he lived the life of his boys helping and encouraging them in their work and hobbies. He would especially single out boys who were orphans or poorer than the rest. To them went the little presents of sweets, clothes, books or anything else which he had received from friends.

In the same house there was another Brother who was suffering from the same malady of Brother Denis. Both were intimate friends and lived for the same ideals. One day Bro. Denis said to his friend: "I am praying to the Sacred Heart that if either of us is to be cured you should be the one. You are stronger, you will be able to work harder and longer than myself. I told the Sacred Heart that I am offering my life for you."

Actually the Brother fully recovered and now he is a priest and a zealous laborer in the Assam mission.

Apostolate of Example

All those who lived with him are of one voice in commenting on the compelling example of his religious observance. It is a common experience that young religious, even the most fervent, suffer a setback in fervor on their first contact with the active life. It seems that Brother Denis never had this misfortune, and if he was always as faithful to the most minute details of the religious observance as he had been in the days of his novitiate, the reason is to be found in his high ideal of the religious life. It was not scruple but high principle that prompted all his actions. Once writing to a former superior in

England he lamented that he could not lay his hand on the English translation of the Superior General's letter on "Fidelity to Saint John Bosco". Would it be possible to have a copy sent to him? How grateful he would be. . .

We can understand now why his Rector paid the young religious an enviable compliment by calling him, "The Ideal Salesian cleric who could safely and confidentially be entrusted with any task, however responsible. He was one to whom you could always have recourse without ever having to worry about being refused. Brother Denis, continues the same superior, had a keen realization of the gravity and responsibility of a Salesian educator. It was his constant practice during the retreats to constantly renew his resolution of striving more and more to understand the real spirit of the preventive system. One of his confreres remarks, "He was very vigilant and his observant eye missed nothing. His boys loved him and would do anything for him."

Fidelity to Saint John Bosco and to the Salesian rule account for his great love of obedience. One of his companions comments, "It was noticed that Brother Denis raised his biretta as soon as he saw a superior in the distance. Like Saint John Berchmans and Father Beltrami he would not pass the Rector's

room without paying the same act of respect." He was most particular about those small permissions which the rule prescribes. He was rather worried once because one of his letters had been mailed without having passed through the superior's hands. Inadvertently it had been sent with the Bishop's mail. On another occasion he had received a letter through the Bishop's secretary and it had not been seen by the Rector. He waited until he got the superior's permission before he opened it.

Purity shone in his eyes and, in fact, from his whole countenance, perhaps this is why children were so drawn to him. A confrere gives us the following comment on the modesty with which he safeguarded this precious virtue. "One evening, since Brother Denis and I were both on the sick list, we were allowed to attend a concert in the parish hall. There was also a play performed by the girls of the parish. When the entertainment was over I asked him how he liked the play. His reply was, 'I usually do not bother much when girls are acting. They tried to please us and we ought to try to please them with our presence, not ourselves.'" His love of obedience was equalled only by his love for poverty. "Though he took great care of his person," the same Salesian writes, "he was content with whatever he was given.

For four years he had only a couple of threadbare blankets on his bed."

Everybody remembers his thoughtfulness and gratitude for little services. When anyone went to visit him in his little room his usual expression was, "Thank you very much and God bless you." Once while a priest was visiting him Brother Denis dozed off, so the priest left. When he awoke he sent someone to thank the priest for calling. He showed the same gracious appreciation when the boys went to see him or did any little service for him. "On the day that he went to God," writes Father Kenny, "he asked me to make him a cup of tea at 11:00 that morning. It was his first cup of tea after several days of lime juice, barley water and jelly, the only three things that seemed to go down easily. He thoroughly enjoyed it. Afterwards he said, 'Thank you, Father, what a beautiful cup of tea.' Very simple words, but believe me, I will never forget the tone in which they were said. He asked for some water at 4:00 but when he remembered that was the community hour for tea he corrected himself, 'No, Father, not at four but when you have finished your tea.' I remember on another evening when the community was already at night prayers I still had to take my little bite as I was busy attending to him. 'Father,' he said, 'you

don't know how much this troubles me.' 'Don't let that worry you,' I told him. 'It gives me a chance to merit a little too.' I repeat these things, and I could multiply them too, just to show how very thoughtful he was, even while he suffered. He would have been a grand priest for he had a wonderful esteem of the priesthood. After my ordination he never called me anything but Father, though we were companions of old. For example I could never get him to pass through a door before myself. I held back once before the chapel door. 'Come on, don't make a fuss. Go ahead! We are old companions.' He replied, 'Yes, we were old companions, but now you are a priest.' So I had to go first.

Last Days

"By the end of December, 1943 it was clear that his strength was rapidly ebbing away. He renewed the sacrifice of his life. He offered it once more to the Sacred Heart for the great ideals which had been the inspiration of his youth - the conversion of India, the expansion of the Salesian apostolate and the salvation of all the boys in his adopted land. Upon his desk he had a picture of the 'Ecce Homo' which he seemed to cherish very much. Incidentally, Fr. Beltrami had a similiar image in his room and he used

to spend long hours of prayer before it. Brother Denis was often seen gazing on that image. Doubtless, "concludes Father Kenny, " he was uniting his sufferings to those of his Savior."

The last weeks of his illness were especially touching. Father Kenny, who attended to him to the end with so much devotion, again writes: "In May I found the invalid steadily weaker. The fatal germs had already spread to his stomach and even to his throat, for his voice had begun to fail. The doctor came and told me that it would not be more than a month before the end would come." His Rector writes , "When I finally informed him that the doctor gave very little hope of recovery, he simply smiled and placed himself in the arms of God."

On May the eleventh he received the last Sacraments from the Bishop of Shillong in the presence of all his confreres. Father Kenny tells us that, "On that day a fervent novena to Our Lady Help of Christians was started as a last attempt to bring about what could only be a miraculous recovery. 'I am perfectly happy,' he told me. 'It is only my mother that I am thinking of. My going will certainly hasten hers.' 'Don't let that worry you,' I replied. 'She will simply ask that God's holy Will be done and enjoy the reward of her sacrifice for all eternity.' "

Perhaps that was the same day on which the invalid penned his last letter to his mother in far off Ireland. It is a letter which no one can read without deep emotion. Here is the greater part of it:

"My dearest Mother,

This is my last letter to you. By the time you have received it I will have passed to my eternal reward. Do not weep, Mother. I am going to join Dad, Ita and Kathleen in the loving embrace of God Whom you taught me to love. You come soon too, and then we will be happily united forever. I know that it is a great sacrifice for you to offer; but I also know that you will gladly offer me to God. Your sacrifice is greater since I was so near the priesthood. But think what a sacrifice it is for me after long years of study to be deprived of that priestly joy on the very threshold of the sanctuary. However, dearest Mother, I bow my head and will in submission and resignation to the holy Will of God. Let us cheerfully and generously offer our sacrifices together to the Lord. There is no need to recommend myself to your prayers. I know that you will never, never forget, even for a single day your dear one lying in a lonely and forgot-

*ten corner of a village churchyard far, far away
in a mission land.*

Good-by, Mother . . . In a last loving embrace

Your loving child in the Sacred Heart,

Denis Molaise Columba, S.D.B."

Cheerfully and generously! In these two words are depicted all his soul and the ardent aspirations of his life.

"After receiving the Last Sacraments he was slightly better," continues Father Kenny. "He even made the Holy Hour with us on the feast of the Ascension, seated at the back of the chapel in his arm-chair. But it was only a brief rally. He took to his bed again never to leave it. The last two weeks were weeks of real suffering and undoubtedly of great merit for the sufferer. During all that time Brother Denis never doubted for a moment that Heaven would be his. As Father Rector put it, 'He spoke of Heaven as if he were already there.' One evening he remarked, 'If I did not think it cowardly to run away from my sufferings, I would pray Jesus to take me.' On another occasion, after gazing on the image of Our Lady on his holy water font, he turned to me and said, 'How I long to see her in Heaven!' Coughing

became so prolonged that during the night he could hardly sleep for any length of time. Fits of choking which lasted for minutes at a time left him prostrate. His one prayer during all this was, "All for Jesus!" These words the devoted confrere had printed in large letters and pasted over his favorite picture of the Sacred Heart. It was a happy thought for I often saw his eyes fixed on them in moments of suffering and in moments of calm. The day before the end came he beckoned to me and asked, 'Father, are you sure that my prayer of resignation is good enough? I assured him that it was and he was much consoled. His Father Rector adds, 'A few days before he died he called me to his bedside and asked me to thank everybody, confreres and boys, past and present, for all that they had done for him. It was evident that their names were engraved on his heart."

Brother Denis had one great desire, to die on Our Lady's day. He must have had that in mind when he asked for a new scapular to replace his old, worn out one. He was overjoyed when the new scapular was placed over his shoulders. Our Lady granted his desire and the end came on the following Saturday. It was the twenty-fourth of his favorite month, the month of the Sacred Heart. On that day he asked to go to confession. It had been the day for his week-

ly confession ever since his boyhood days and he had always been faithful to it. It was some time after four o'clock in the afternoon that he entered his last agony. The confreres were hastily summoned to his bedside while the boys hurried to the chapel to say the Rosary. The Bishop donned the purple stole and began the prayers for the dying. Brother Denis could not speak but it was noticed that whenever the crucifix was put to his lips they made a movement as if to kiss it. He passed away at ten minutes to five at the age of twenty-six years and nine months.

The funeral was something memorable. A congregation nearly two thousand strong attended the solemn requiem Mass and the last rites at the cemetery. Besides the Salesian community and the boys, there were Passionist Fathers, Irish Christian Brothers, Loretto Sisters, Presentation Sisters and Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians. His Excellency assisted at the graveside and in moving words spoke of Brother Denis' marvelous fortitude and of his love of God and his neighbor. One of his companions, a young confrere, read a tribute from the community and one of the students read a tribute from the boys.

We are told that the children of Shillong were inconsolable at the loss of their friend: and that for

a long time, every week they visited his grave to cover it with fresh flowers.

But the valiant mother in far off Ireland was not inconsolable. People marvelled at the serene fortitude with which she read her Denis' last message. Of him she would always speak with pride, having now only one wish - to rejoin him one day in glory and sing with him the mercies of the Sacred Heart forever. (She died serenely in December 1955)



Should anyone find this story somewhat perplexing let him recall Our Lord's words a few days before His Passion: "*Amen, amen, I say to you, unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains alone. But if it dies it brings forth much fruit.*" (John 12, 24)

It is because of the hidden sacrifices of these unsung heroes - because of these 'grains of wheat' prematurely buried under the ground that the Missionary Apostolate advances.

Pioneers are like soldiers in the first line. To secure an advanced post they are prepared to go down.

Today the Salesian Mission of India, in which Brother Denis worked during his pioneer days and for which he offered his life, is on its triumphant march. *

Let, then, our young men whose heart is in the missionary apostolate draw inspiration and courage from this generous young Salesian. Let them thank God for having shown once more that our youth can, through His grace, (as Pius XII often insists) be heroic. For *“no greater love than this man has, that he lay down his life for his friends.”* (John 15, 13)

* Today the India Mission numbers over 600 Salesians (including one archbishop and four bishops) — 72 schools. orphanages and mission stations and over 300 young aspirants for the priesthood.

