

Boys' Town,
Engadine,
New South Wales.
March 24th, 1968.

My dear Confreres,

Early on Thursday morning, December 28th, while the good sisters of charity in St. Vincent's hospital were attending to him, the best known Salesian in Australia, Father Joseph Ciantar was called to the Lord at the age of 74.

The end had come rather suddenly as this ever energetic priest had collapsed in the midst of his work only one week before. A few days earlier he had given a talk, in his usual stimulating and vivacious way, to the boys of the Dominic Savio Club. He was looking forward now to the first Christmas liturgy in his new parish church. Instead, he preached a splendid sermon by his example from a hospital bed on how to accept God's will serenely, and how to trust in the strength of the christian sacraments at the end.

No one in this province has merited a full-length biography more than Father Ciantar, but a sketchy letter will have to suffice for the present. For although it may seem strange at first glance to designate as the real founder of Salesian work in Australia one who did not come to the country until 14 years after the work had begun, yet a fair-minded appraisal cannot deny him this honour.

From a chronological viewpoint, Father Ciantar's life falls into three main divisions: his early life and vocational work in the British Isles, his developing of Don Bosco's work as provincial delegate of Australia, and his final work as rector and parish priest in Engadine.

Born at Valetta, Malta on 7th June, 1893, Joseph Laurence Ciantar was to show the life-long traits of solid piety and self-discipline taught him by his good parents. Although he was to see little of his native Malta during his active missionary life, he was to carry a little part of it always with him in that Paul-like zeal and distinctive enthusiasm.

As a teenager in doubt about his vocation, Joseph Ciantar settled his doubts by going to confession to Don Rua, who told him that he was meant to be a Salesian. After a four year aspirantate at St. Patrick's, Malta and at the Martinetto, Turin, he went to England.

Having received his cassock from a pioneer in Father Macey, he made his novitiate under Father Simonetti, who realized the sterling character of the newcomer and kept him at Burwash as Novices' Assistant. This assignment Brother Joseph kept right through studies and tirocinium until his ordination in 1920 by Archbishop Amigo of Southwark.

As the Bursar of Cowley a year after his ordination, Father Ciantar still found time to establish a Boys' Club for the youth of the district, as well as a soccer team for the apprentices from the Morris-Oxford industry. The sight of this spirited young priest doing untold spiritual good while acting as a spectacular playing coach, was not lost on the industry's head, Lord Nuffield.

When the superiors came to open a new missionary college or juniorate at Shrigley in 1929, they appointed the football-playing Father Ciantar as its first rector. After twelve months there began the now famous "partnership", as he called it, with the late Father Angelo Franco. For while Father Franco kept a fatherly eye on the aspirants of Shrigley House, Father Ciantar travelled the length and breadth of the British Isles, twice every year for a period of nine years to recruit literally hundreds of young men for the Salesian life. "Father Ciantar brought home the bacon; I cured it", Don Franco used laughingly recall.

Yet he was more than a vocation director. In fact he was Don Bosco's roving ambassador at large, a one man propaganda team making the Salesian name known, often for the first time, in every remote school and parish of Great Britain.

Among those recruits can be numbered missionaries scattered today throughout Asia, South Africa, Australia and Europe, including Father Bernard Tohill of the Superior Council. Even those who did not persevere - and at that fickle age they were many - kept a lasting impression of Father Ciantar.

"His enthusiasm for Don Bosco's work gleamed from his eyes", one layman and former aspirant writes in the Irish Independent. "My later acquaintance showed that same zest and wonderfully happy disposition; a flashing smile was a feature of his conversation on all occasions. Many will be sad on learning of his death, for the world is short of men of his calibre".

During this same period Father Ciantar somehow found time as well to collect funds for the national shrine to St. John Bosco in England - mainly small contributions from working class people, and every one could rely on a personal note of thanks. His idealism and high spirits had made Don Bosco's smiling face a living reality during his apostolate in the British Isles.

It must have taken great strength of character to accept the new field of work entrusted to him in 1938 - the direction of Salesian work in Australia. It was a challenging assignment, to say the least, for after 14 years the Salesians still had only one foundation, at Rupertswood and that house saddled with a crushing debt of £30,000. For all those years the work had marked time, with no precise aim or clear-cut future and with a very limited intake of students. Dispirited by repeated failures and worn out by work on an unproductive farm, the community felt at a loss before Father's coming. Quite a few in fact had abandoned the work in despair and gone back to Europe.

To such a task, armed with the Rector Major's actual ultimatum "to make a go of it or to close up", Father Ciantar now set a determined face. On his arrival his very first act was a master-stroke of charity, for he sent the work-wearied confreres to the Hepburn Spa Springs for their first holiday in twelve years. The rejuvenated community were soon behind him to a man, and even the house chronicle takes on a more optimistic note after his arrival. His sprightly and affectionate nature was not lost on the boys either, and their new Father was a welcome visitor in such simple courtyard games as "Dog and Bone" or "Red Rover".

Realizing, as he had in England, that a good public image was essential if he wished to attract vocations and cooperators, Father Ciantar set about scattering Salesian seeds; apparently at random, but with that very real system so peculiar to him. Most parish halls throughout Victoria and South Australia saw the screening of the film "The Life of Don Bosco", while a bimonthly publication called "The Help of Christians" soon made its appearance. Radio talks on our founder, leagues of friends and similar groups did their part in winning support, but it was his close personal contacts that drew vocations.

When a new Salesian foundation branched out at Brunswick in the early war years, it was the first sign of resurgence from the mother trunk at Sunbury.

Appointed provincial delegate in 1941, undaunted by the difficulties of the war years, Father opened the first Australian novitiate at Rupertswood with four novices, including the present provincial. His years of long training as Father Simonetti's assistant were to stand him in good stead now as novice master.

With the approval of Archbishop Mannix, who was to remain his lifelong friend, Father Ciantar set about a systematic appeal for funds in the Melbourne archdiocese. When he finally reached his target of £40,000 for a new juniorate, many an envious parish

priest regarded him as a modern-day "bushranger" who could engagingly dispossess people of their money. Accordingly he was dubbed "Ned Kelly", a notorious outlaw in Australian history!

A wonderfully fertile period followed with the blessing of Mary Help of Christians evident on Father Ciantar's daring undertakings. A boys' summer camp at Dromana, a school and work of charity in Brooklyn Park, a similar work in Glenorchy, and the long awaited juniorate at Oakleigh - all followed each other in quick succession in three States. It was the high tide of the Australian province and Father Ciantar had played no small part in its resurgence, giving a breadth of vision and freshness of approach earlier thought impossible.

In 1948 on completing his term as provincial delegate, Father Ciantar was appointed rector of the Brunswick club and hostel, where he left behind a fine body of young catholic actionists, including the present national president of the Salesian Old Boys Association.

A very delicate situation was then handed over to Father Ciantar in 1954 in the already existing Boys' Town, Engadine. Founded by a diocesan priest and controlled by an outside, non-sectarian body, the work had reached such a critical stage that the transition to a Salesian system was necessarily a painful one. The full brunt of the criticism fell on Father Ciantar's shoulders but he often repeated "The good Lord has given me big hands for money, and big shoulders for the crosses", and as usual he weathered the stormy period anchored deep in faith.

Spending over £275,000 during his twelve years as rector of Engadine, Father left behind a fine complex of buildings, a Chapel and a swimming pool with an almost frightening reliance all that time on the help of Providence. To his delight, a permanent legacy providing a steady if not spectacular income was the eventual reward for his trust in "God's bank", as he called it.

When, finally, appointed pastor of the Salesian parish in Engadine in 1964, despite his 70 years Father set about building a magnificent modern church - a national shrine at that - to St. John Bosco. He had earlier erected and paid off a parish school staffed by the Salesian sisters. This contemporary church, built at a cost of \$188,000, is one of the architectural and liturgical gems of the Sydney archdiocese. To raise funds, he had made a rushed trip to the U.S.A. and the strain this entailed, plus the problems and contradictions involved in the building of any new church, had taken their toll. He was still recuperating, too, from a serious abdominal operation. Nevertheless the opening festivities for the new church were splendid down to the last detail, so that interstate visitors realized that Father Ciantar had not lost the old Salesian magic. What they did not realize was that this function was to be the Nunc Dimittis of God's incomparable little showman.

When listing Father's impressive qualities as a priest and religious, one hesitates as to where to begin. Those closest to him seem to have remembered best his monastic poverty. Although an estimated million dollars or more must have passed through his hands, his belongings were those of the very poor. Cooperators still speak with awe of his bottle-green suit coat, a cast off from some deceased parish priest, while his worn but well polished boots were reminiscent of an earlier heroic age. The bald headed priest in the faded dust-coat, doing the rounds of the stalls to ask for a box of fruit or a side of bacon, was a familiar figure in the Victorian and Sydney markets.

His evangelical simplicity too was hard to resist. His authentic laughter echoing throughout the dining room, or over the bocci field during retreat time, was a tonic to the rest of us in a more sophisticated age. His boyish pride in such personal accomplishments as turning somersaults on the kitchen floors of cooperators or busily contributing a concert item with his doubtful tenor voice, revealed all dove and no serpent in the man.

Not slow to anger he was even quicker to forgive and his great soul and large heart made him incapable of unearthing old offences. His former novices, particularly, can appreciate his intense spiritual depth. There were some who mistook his speed of action for shallowness of purpose or spiritual superficiality. In fact, his spiritual foundations stood four square in God. Often his morning meditation would be put back as early as 5 a.m. under pressure of work, but it was invariably the moving impulse of his day's activities. His fellow passengers in a car, gently pressured into saying the rosary with him on a journey, may have been astounded at first at the familiar and apparently flippant way that Father spoke of Don Bosco or the Help of Christians. But it was the intimate and childlike approach that stems from deep prayer.

Above all, in the last analysis, it will be his magnanimous spirit and vast vision that will be gratefully remembered in this province in years to come. When the Salesian work was bogged down in an economic morass, Father Ciantar arrived talking alarmingly in terms of thousands; when men grew dismayed at the petty trials of the day, Father spoke expansively of future success on a grand scale. For him, certainly, faith was "the evidence of things that appear not", and he had an uncanny knack of helping others to see "the substance of things to be hoped for".

Many a boy in the British Isles and Australia caught that flash of fire from Father Ciantar's ardent spirit and felt his own young heart, Emmaus like, burning within him on the way to the altar or to the religious life. Youth the world over has an unerring appreciation of such inspired and inspiring men, great as well as good.

A dynamic and unorthodox personality such as his could not possibly have won universal appreciation from confreres and outsiders. There were those who frowned on Father's disconcerting habit of bringing home, with no previous notification, any needy boy he found on his travels. Or those who found it irritating trying to divine his unique system of book-keeping, or trying to keep apace paying old debts while Father Ciantar was busily contracting new ones. Some possibly found him a little flamboyant in his willingness to pose for cartoonists or photographers when funds were desperately short (shades of Don Bosco!); or a little too willing to risk a "lick of the crozier" by propagating Don Bosco's work in a diocese. But even from such men, he must have won admiration at least for his lion-hearted courage and noble faith.

Indeed we have lost the last of our elder statesmen, a loss that a young province such as ours can ill afford. Was there a touch of providential playfulness in Father's going to enjoy his reward on the feast of the Holy Innocents? A childlike singleness of purpose and limpid simplicity had set him apart in two continents as an object of holy envy to all who met him. Had not his genuine delight always been with the little ones of the family?

Our good Father's body was laid to rest in the Rupertswood Salesian cemetery beside the other pioneers. Only a few yards away the harvest-trailers go out each summer to bring in the heavy crops from the cereal fields, a symbol surely of the spread of Salesian work and the growth of vocations under such vigorous labourers as Father Joseph Ciantar.

"Unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground dieth, the grain itself remains alone".

Please pray for the repose of his noble soul, as well as for the welfare of this house.

Yours sincerely in Don Bosco,
Father Edward Power,
Rector.