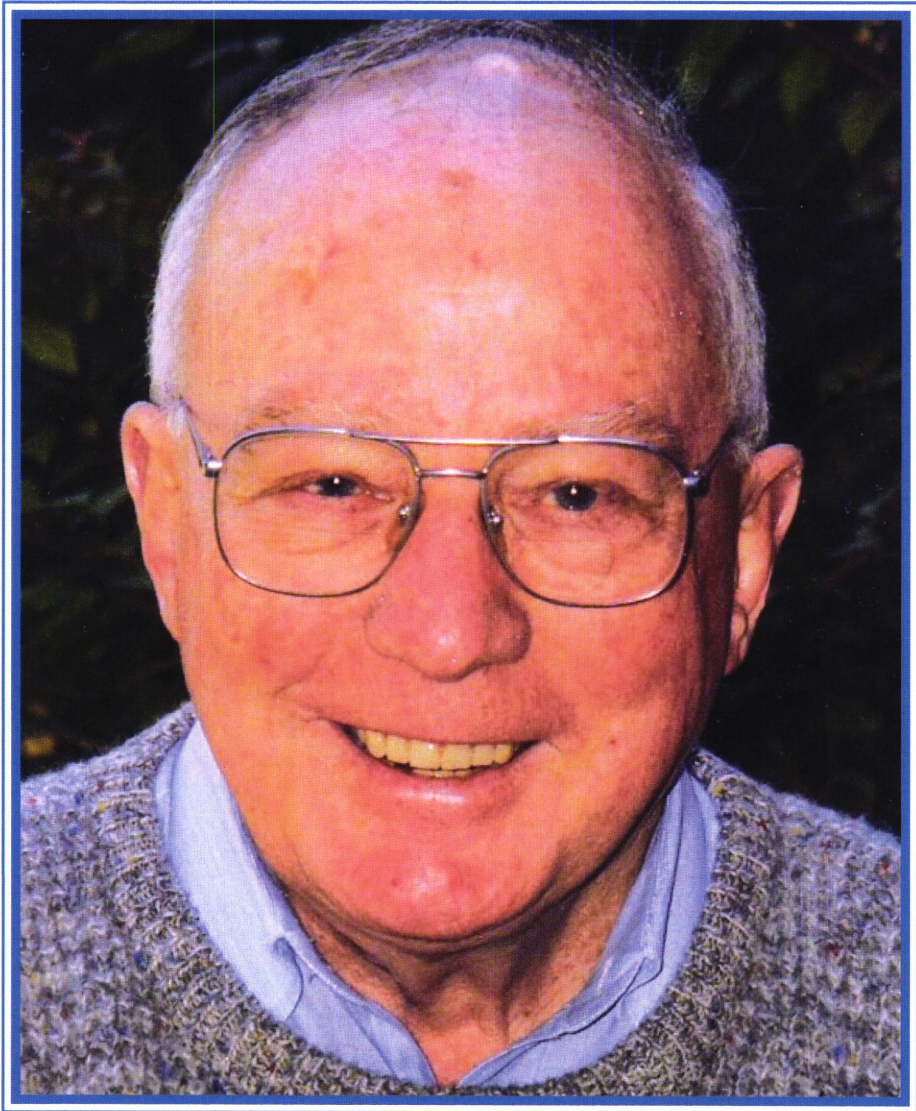


In Loving Memory of

Fr Edward (Ted) Cooper SDB



Born

10 January 1926 Moonee Ponds, Australia

Religious Profession

31 January 1945 Sunbury, Australia

Ordained a Priest

1 July 1955 Valdocco, Turin, Italy

Entered Eternal Life

9 September 2013 Engadine, Australia

Fr Ted, as he was most commonly and affectionately known, passed away gently on the morning of the ninth of September 2013 at the John Paul Village Nursing Home in Engadine, New South Wales, Australia. It was the doorway from an end-of-life journey that he knew full well had its designated finality, as he had been diagnosed with terminal secondary cancers some eleven months earlier. In his final months he diligently set about getting his effects, particularly his extensive historical study notes, in good order. He made this writer's task much easier as he also compiled extensive autobiographical notes. Spiritually, he also prepared through gentle prayer, recourse to the sacraments and a resolute acceptance of what was to be, evidenced by his calm welcoming of his many visitors and cheerful conversations with them.

Edward Cooper was born on the 10th of January 1926 in Moonee Ponds, just out of Melbourne and only a kilometre or so from where our Province Centre now sits. This is in the territory of Essendon and helps explain a lifelong passion for the local *Bombers* Australian Football League team.

Ted was the second youngest of five boys and three girls born to Lawrence and Eunice. Three of the children did not survive infancy and Ted's other two sisters predeceased him. He is survived by Laurie and Ken. At the time of Ted's death, Laurie was approaching his 100th birthday. His father, Lawrence, was in the police force and received various postings in suburban and country Victoria, so the family moved frequently during Ted's school years. Perhaps Ted's later thirst for travel and for ministry in the Outback sprang from this experience.



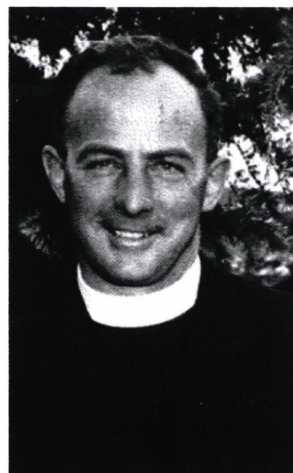
He writes of a generally happy experience in his early schooling and often spoke fondly of some of the kindly Sisters who taught him. However, his time in secondary College was to prove rather more trying. He began his secondary studies in 1940 at Christian Brothers College, St Kilda. In his inimitable manner of "calling a spade a spade" he comments, *Not a very good year. Out of my depth in a class of boys who had already done Algebra and Geometry for at least two years. [The following year] troubles continued, accentuated by a b... of a Brother who really belted Latin into the class. I rebelled. [At 15] I was transferred to St Kevin's Toorak to see if a change of school would improve things. They got worse! Here I ran into the eccentric Bro P who taught me Latin*

and English. English was no problem, but again he used the 'belting' method. I needed Latin if I went on to the priesthood – it was a 'must' for seminary entrance. It was a terrible year. I failed Latin in the November exam, but passed in a "Supplementary Exam" in January.

During his adolescence, Ted perceived he had a call to priesthood. He was resolute about this, and throughout his later priestly life he would be no less resolute in putting the question of a vocation to other boys and young men. In 1943 he was sixteen and asked to join the aspirantate of an order of priests and brothers who were fairly new to the Melbourne scene and conducted their then only school out at Sunbury, the Salesians. Ted's father would join the annual Eucharistic Procession at Sunbury and the Salesian educational reputation was one of great gentleness, unusual in schooling at that time. So he completed his Leaving Certificate at Rupertswood, Sunbury commenting, *a good year with no Brothers scaring hell out of me. I did some very easy classes; kitchen work and mixed with the boarders.* At seventeen, Ted was accepted into the Salesian Novitiate under the direction of Fr Joseph Ciantar and Fr Edward Power. He regarded this as another good year which passed quickly with classes, work, meals, recreation and spiritual duties. He professed his first vows and worked through some rather elementary studies in philosophy and basic teacher training.

In 1947, the twenty year old Brother Cooper went for his practical training to the Salesian Boys' Home in Brooklyn Park, near Adelaide. This work had begun only four years previously and he comments, *not terribly demanding as teaching went, but long hours assisting the boys – seven days a week with next to no free time.*

At this stage of the Salesian presence in Australia we were not yet a province in our own right and most studies for priesthood were completed overseas. Consequently, in the beginning of 1951 Ted and Jack O'Day made their final profession and sailed to England, crossed the Chanel and then caught a train to Turin in Italy for priesthood studies at the Crocetta.



He gives few details of his theology studies, beyond, as he would comment later, that they were bland and rote learned. He does make special mention of two summer visits to the German Salesian theologate at Benediktbeuren, especially when, after the second in 1953, and working on a moral theology dictum that forgiveness is normally easier than permission, he



decided to make an unannounced bicycle ride around Southern Germany. 17 days, about 1500 km, about 90 per day. There was a very interesting sequel when I got back to Turin and superiors found out! I was held back from Diaconate for six months and threats of postponing ordination indefinitely. However, the following year, with nothing further said and having been awarded his Licentiate of Sacred Theology, he was ordained deacon in April and priest on July 1st 1955 in Turin. The now Father Cooper sailed back to Australia.

In an article for the erstwhile province newsletter, *The Link*, he reminisced, *They talk about 'culture shock', well, I had a bad case of it on January 17th 1956 when I got my first look at Boys' Town, Engadine. Fresh from the Halls of Learning at the Crocetta, bursting with idealism after four years at the feet of Salesian Greats . I was bewildered and disillusioned at the first sight of my field of apostolate. It was mid-summer. It was hot, and the grass had not been watered. The air was still and cicadas strummed away in the scrub near the playing fields. A few boys were in residence but they seemed more interested in their comics than in the arrival of the zealous apostle.*

Yet settle in he did for the next eight years. *I am happy to have been part of Boys' Town in those early days. In spite of the short comings they were great days. Old Boys phoned or wrote to him over the ensuing years and a number visited him during his final illness and attended his requiem. Most of them simply wanted to talk with gratitude about the old days and their enduring attachment to the one place of stability in an otherwise*



turbulent youth. As so many have said, *"We had nothing, but we enjoyed our stay at Boys' Town."* That was a fine accolade to the Salesians of those early years.

Then in 1964, as Ted turned thirty six, there was a very sudden announcement that the Provincial, Fr Fedrigotti, had suffered a serious heart attack and was in hospital. *Fr Wally Cornell, at Chadstone, took over as Provincial and with a week's notice I was promoted as Rector of Chadstone!! I had never taught anything above Grade 6, never had administrative experience but, with no experience was now Rector of a community of twelve and a College of 700 boys from Year 7 to Matriculation!!*

He spent six solid years guiding Salesian College, Chadstone, assisted as a member of the Provincial Council, and was then posted back to Boys' Town as Rector. But he found the scene (and perhaps himself) very different. *Six years had changed the direction of the place and most of the kids were on medication and needed specialist*



care. I was most unhappy and when a possibility came [at the end of that year] to get out I accepted rectorship of Lysterfield. But this role similarly proved untenable for Ted. This was an equally difficult period of my life. I am not cut out to be a novice master and director of newly professed clerics. I was out of my depth and desperately lonely. I was out of this job in a year. Adding to this difficult time in his life, his sister Dorothy died near the end of that same year.

The following year was a more enjoyable one as he resumed teaching at Chadstone and was appointed Rector the year after that, 1973. But a new future was evolving. *During that year I had some correspondence with an OLSH Sister working at Daly River Mission. Their PP was a crippled MSC priest who could barely move around. I offered to take his place over the Christmas holidays. The Bishop agreed [and I] got to Darwin mid-December and on the way down to Daly River the truck in which I was a passenger rolled over. Ted's neck was broken in the accident and he was ambulated back to Darwin hospital for nearly three months of bed-confined spinal traction. Not to be deterred, he bore it with resignation and, when discharged, immediately boarded a plane for Daly River whose road link was then cut by flood. The intended*



brief summer holiday locum translated into several months in the Territory, mixed between convalescence and Aboriginal mission work, but he relished the challenges. He returned to the Chadstone leadership in July, in time to be in Melbourne when his mother passed away in September.

Ted had just turned fifty in 1977 when the Provincial Council decided to initiate a presence in the Northern Territory and the following year he went north as Assistant Priest at the Darwin Cathedral parish for three months and then out to the island Aboriginal missions. He comments, *I divided my time between Bathurst and Melville Islands. I was really responsible for Melville Island – mass, funerals, etc. This was two years. Two great years!*

Indeed in his preaching thence afterwards, he would continually draw on anecdotes from this time. One incident (duly described in a series of articles for *The Link* and titled “*The Thoroughly Modern Missionary*”) well exemplifies his ministry and attitude. He was scheduled to celebrate Sunday mass on Melville Island but arrived late after a bad tide slowed his dinghy and then the old Land Cruiser burst a tyre during the drive in from the beach. *Up drove Father in his Toyota, covered in dust and mud, barefoot (thongs get sucked off in the mangrove mud) and thirsty. There is nowhere to wash and no hope of changing, so straight into the Liturgy with a murmured apology to the Lord and asking Him to close an eye to the liberties taken with the ritual. A group strummed out the hymns on guitars, Sister prowled around urging them to sing up, little naked children rolled around in the sandy dirt, while dogs lay on the ground or stalked around looking for a fight (which more often than not they found), old men squatted under trees, young mothers suckled little babies, young men stood in a group behind the assembly as young men do anywhere. And so the ceremony began and God came down in the Mass to be amongst His people again in spite of Father’s smelliness, the people’s lack of outward display, the fighting dogs. God must love us very much!*

Fr Ted celebrated mass in corrugated iron churches or sometimes under a simple canopy of trees. His usual congregations were a mix of black and white, old and young. He had a keen interest in Australian history and in many ways saw himself as replicating some of the deeds of the early colonial priests of



the Great South Land. Like them, too, he believed his vocation was to nurture faith in the isolated pockets of Catholics in this challenging continent. But alongside the romantic historian lived the pragmatic realist, as the following summation of his three years on the islands shows, *The experience on the Tiwi Islands was an opportunity to look over Aboriginal apostolates in the Northern Territory and advise the Provincial as to a possible opening. We decided that the Missions were not working and that Government Agencies were taking the place of a lot of mission work – education, health, housing, etc. The town of Katherine, about 300 km south of Darwin seemed a good start – parish, then possibility of moving out around the cattle stations to see whites and blacks in and around the stations.*

He went as Pastor in Katherine and its huge parish, which extended from Queensland to the West Australian border, for eight years. He ministered in the township and loved the long drives out to isolated cattle stations where he could celebrate the Sacraments and talk with scattered families and itinerant farmhands. He also had the rare privilege during this tenure of driving Mother Teresa from Katherine to Darwin as she visited her Missionaries of Charity



and negotiated with the Territory Government. Mother Teresa, in genuine humility habitually resisted posing for photos, but Ted, with typical humour and outspoken determination, told her "Mother, I have to have a picture with you. If not, you have to pay me for the petrol to Darwin." She replied she had no money, so best if the photo was quickly taken. And it became one he showed proudly, particularly after her cause for sainthood was introduced.

Most of the Katherine tenure was as the lone priest, but he was happy and made long-lasting friends with people in the town and others out at the very isolated stations. Still, it took its toll through solitariness and his concerned Provincial recommended a move back into mainstream community life. So in 1989 he moved to parish work and rectorship in Glenorchy, Tasmania. Though others may have seen it differently, his comment on this time was a *dismissive pretty boring period*. After the adventures of *The Thoroughly Modern Missionary* in the outback, this was quite a confrontation with relative suburban blandness and community life pressures.

Then followed seven years in Bairnsdale, in what he describes as *a vague sort of posting, not at all exciting after years with wild aborigines in the territory*. And, though he commented little on the ensuing ten years as Assistant Parish Priest at St Marys, many parishioners retain very fond memories of his presence among them. A further stint back in



Bairnsdale from 2007 to 2009 is condemned as *bored out of my brain*. It wasn't easy for a modern day version of Fr John Joseph Therry to retire back to suburban life! A long cherished letter to him, written in 1989 by Bathurst Island teacher Pat O'Brien, perhaps best encapsulates the maelstrom of Ted's gifts and shadowing challenges:

It's hard to believe that the Ted Cooper we know is finishing up in the Territory Eleven years is a long time – the ups and downs, the adventure, the heartbreaks, the frustrations, the excitement of starting or taking over a new parish, the building of friendships – community, a catholic school in Katherine, many good memories and a share of memories you may prefer to forget.

I wonder how many [back home] would. . . know you well enough to have any idea of your many, many trips out bush to be there for people who lived in incredible isolation – what happened there? How did you relate to them? Would they stop and think about the fact that you took and lived out the gospels to those people? Would they have a clue about the good you achieved; the sharing of yourself?

Without doubt you are the most unusual or extraordinary priest I've ever known, not eccentric but definitely adventurous. So you remember the T.V. series "Have Gun Will Travel"? I often think of you in a similar vein – "Have Faith Will Travel" or "Have Faith, Will Try Anything". That's something that's always impressed me, your willingness to try something new, different and sometimes outrageous.

2009 brought Fr Ted to Engadine as Assistant Priest. Mellowed and reflective, he comments, *Life has gone full circle (in my priestly life). Engadine was my first posting back in 1956 – 53 years! Getting old! Officially retired. Health deteriorating slowly. A variety of complaints. Quite happy however.* Indeed, by and large he enjoyed his final years and loved to reminisce and share tales with fellow retirees at the parish Men's Shed or over morning tea with the Thursday working-bee men or the Friday church-cleaning ladies. And missionary anecdotes regularly found their way into his homilies. He was always the priest, always the Salesian.

A natural story-teller, he also wrote well and nurtured a great interest in Australian Catholic history. With two dear friends he was even able to spend a recent working holiday as visiting chaplain on Norfolk Island and, with the eye of the experienced historian, guide them through this chapter of Australia's convict beginnings. Though he never had the opportunity for formal tertiary study in history, he became a very accomplished amateur, undertaking careful research, getting to know various diocesan archivists, keeping copious notes and telling stories which held interest. The Province published two books he authored on the early history of the Salesians in the Kimberley and the



beginnings of our ministry on the south-eastern seaboard. At the time of publishing this letter, his third book about early priests in colonial Australia is in the throes of publication. Its posthumous publication might well include a further biography, that of a more modern day pioneer priest named Fr Ted Cooper.

Ironically, it was a physical legacy of the unrelenting Australian sun in his years in the tropics which finally claimed his life. A fatally late identified melanoma on his hand metastasised into secondary lung and brain cancers, leading ultimately to hospitalisation and four final months of palliative care in the wonderfully supportive John Paul Village nursing home, a special part of our Engadine parish community. During this time, family, friends and former students from as close as Engadine and far as Queensland, Tasmania and the Northern Territory, provided a regular stream of visitors. In a fitting finale for the one who regularly “went fishing” for vocations, one of the first men he invited to become a Salesian, Br Stan Rossato, was at his bedside just moments before Ted Cooper passed on to his God.

Ted’s requiem in the Shrine of Saint John Bosco at Engadine was concelebrated by fellow Salesian priests of his recent communities and he was prayed over by the Brothers and Sisters of the congregation he loved and gave his life for. Accompanied by members of his family of origin, the Sisters of the Missionaries of Charity and many local and past friends came to pray for him and reminisce. His nephew, Dan Cooper gave a loving eulogy, penned with advice from Ted’s older brother, Laurie. At the same time, Marty and Jenny Duggan had organised a memorial mass with many of his former parishioners in the Katherine church in the Northern Territory. Two days later, in the presence of Ted’s family, former students from Chadstone and Sunbury and the Salesians, Fr Provincial celebrated Ted’s funeral mass and his Rector presided over the internment at Rupertswood, Sunbury, the school where Ted first met and joined the Salesians. In the cemetery, Ted Cooper joined many of those other “Grateful Heirs” he had eulogised in his histories.

Fr Peter Carroll SDB, Rector
on behalf of the Engadine Community

