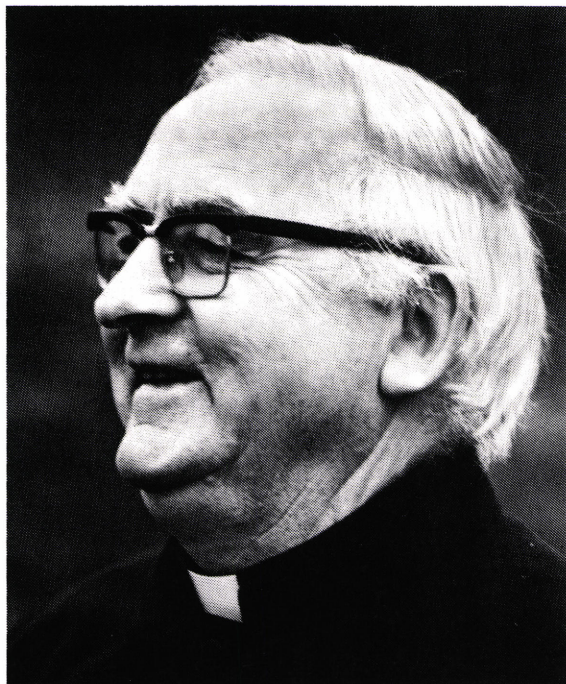


Province of Mary Help of Christians  
Oakleigh, 3166 Vic.  
Australia



**FATHER WALLACE L. CORNELL, SDB**  
(1921-1986)



*"The life and death of each one of us has its influence on others; if we live, we live for the Lord; if we die we die for the Lord; so that alive or dead we belong to the Lord." (Rom. 14, 7-8)*

We are all convinced that this quotation is an appropriate description of the life and death of our confrere

### **FATHER WALLACE LEON CORNELL**

His memory is treasured by all those who knew him; his life has become part of the fabric of many lives and of the history of the Australian Salesian Province.

Many events in the life of Father Cornell, and certainly his death, remind us that the ways of the Lord are mysterious and that our destiny is in the hands of God. The Lord called Father Cornell to Himself suddenly and unexpectedly during the night between 9 and 10 July 1986, at the Provincial House in New Rochelle, New York.

Earlier this year Father Cornell had accepted the invitation of Father E. Cappelletti, the Director of the Salesian Missions Office in New Rochelle, to spend a few weeks during July and August in the United States to preach the appeals on behalf of the Propagation of the Faith.

At the end of that assignment, he was due to go to Berkeley, California, to teach an eight-week course on St. Francis de Sales, at the Salesian Studies Centre.

Father Cornell had only been in the United States for about two weeks before the Lord called him to his reward.

On the morning of Thursday 10 July — the day when he was due to leave New Rochelle for Des Moines, Iowa, to preach the appeal there — Father Cornell, who was the first in the chapel each morning, did not come in for Mass, Meditation and breakfast, thus raising the suspicion that he might not have been well. Later on in the morning the Rector received no answer when he knocked on Father Cornell's door. Eventually he decided to enter the bedroom only to find Father Cornell "peacefully asleep in the Lord" on his bed. The "good and faithful servant" had surrendered his life to the Lord without a murmur, with the same obedience and serenity which were characteristic of his life.

The news of Father Cornell's sudden death shocked all those who knew him. For, even though he had not enjoyed the best of health since completing his term of office as Provincial in 1981, during the last six months prior to his death he seemed to have a new lease of life, perhaps because he had been given a new assignment of establishing the Don Bosco Volunteers in Australia. He had approached the trip as well as the preaching and teaching in the States with the zest and expectation of a young man who was going overseas for the first time, and his doctor had declared that his blood pressure was within an acceptable level.



Father Cornell was a man who appeared reserved, cherished a sense of privacy and enjoyed an orderly and predictable style of life. His pattern of activity was so regular that any change would be taken as a sign that he was not well or had to attend to some very important business. An interesting insight into Father Cornell's orderly and thoughtful style of living is seen in the fact that in his personal file in the Provincial Office at Oakleigh he left a sealed envelope with the words: "Some notes to help the writer of my mortuary letter". In it there were two pages of closely-typed information about his life and his family. (I am ever so grateful to Father Cornell for making my task much easier: I shall quote from these pages in the course of this letter.

Wallace Leon Cornell was born on 17 May 1921 — the last of the eight children of George Cornell and Lillian Hill. The father was not a Catholic, but the mother came from a good Catholic family and received a sound religious education as a boarder at Sacred Heart College, Geelong, run by the Mercy Sisters. When Lillian Hill left the College in 1888 — the year of Don Bosco's death — she was given a short life of Don Bosco.

The Cornell family lived on a farm in the small town of Doreen, a few miles north of the city of Melbourne, from the 1860s. Of the eight children of George and Lillian Cornell four are still living. One of them, Jack, who was 81, died two days after Wallace. At this point I quote directly from Father Cornell's written notes:

"I attended the Doreen State School for all but one year of my primary schooling (then 8 years). In 1934, the year of Don Bosco's canonization, a Catholic School was opened by the Good Samaritan Sisters at Epping which was about 14 miles away. I was repeating Grade 8 at Doreen at the time, not because I failed but because my parents could not afford to send me to Melbourne to study and my mother wanted me to go on with my schooling and hoped that something would turn up.

"Through the help of the parish priest, Father Tom Carroll, I joined St. Peter's Epping in the March of 1934. I remember being given a magazine — looking back I realise it was the Salesian Bulletin — to cut up for a religion project. I also remember my father, who was not a Catholic at that time, complaining that I had spoilt a good story by cutting out the pictures."

In passing it is worth noting that Father Carroll was responsible for Wallace's baptism and reception into the Catholic Church, as an adult, at the age of 13!

Father Cornell continues the account of his vocational journey to the Salesians:

“Again by the good offices of Father Carroll and the charity of the Christian Brothers (four years of free schooling) I did my secondary studies at Parade and St. Kevin’s. A brother who influenced my life more than he realised, Brother Rahill, taught Religion at St. Kevin’s and gave us an inspiring talk on St. John Bosco which I still vividly remember.

“At the end of my secondary studies I applied to enter Corpus Christi Seminary to study for the diocesan priesthood. The doctor turned me down and said he would examine me again in a year’s time and, in the meantime, recommended that I do some manual work. By this time my family had moved to the city (in 1936 to Reservoir) so again Father Carroll stepped in and said he would see if he could get me into a place called ‘Rupertswood’ Sunbury for a few months. I could work in the farm or the garden for my keep. I had never heard of this place and did not connect the name Salesian with St. John Bosco.

“I arrived at Sunbury on 1 May 1939 and was welcomed by Father Fedrigotti with a glass of lemonade. I settled down to earning my keep by working in the front garden. Over the months I gave no thought whatsoever about ‘changing horses’. I had already arranged to leave Sunbury in mid-December and face up to the doctor once more. On 8 December Father Ciantar approached me during evening recreation and asked me what I was planning to do the following year. Without realizing what I was saying (I had certainly given it no thought whatsoever) I said I would like to be a Salesian! Why this sudden decision? I don’t know — ‘Rupertswood’ in those days had little to attract anyone. Life was rugged, to say the least!!!

“When I went home and told my mother what I planned to do she smiled. In the first place she was relieved — my father, after years of illness, had died in 1938 and she had no idea how she would pay for me at the diocesan seminary in Werribee. She had just prayed that something would turn up. Secondly, she told me that her old teacher from Geelong, Mother Angela, who was now Mistress of Novices at Rosanna, had shown her a list of special intentions outside the novitiate chapel. Among them was one that I would become a Salesian!

“I returned to Sunbury the following February as an aspirant. Father Ciantar was preparing for a lightning expansion of the Salesian works in Australia and was already building the Club and Hostel at Brunswick. This was opened in September under the direction of Father John Biloni and a staff of green young men, including myself.



"From this staff came the first group of four novices to make their novitiate in Australia. Father Ciantar was the novice master, one of his several portfolios, and the Socius Father Power. First vows were taken by all four on 31 January 1942.

"By 1943 Father Ciantar had struck again! He had accepted responsibility for Boys' Town, Brooklyn Park, and had sent Father Biloni over there as the man in charge. He was followed in January 1944 by three of the four 'first novices' for practical training. Again I had the privilege of being part of a pioneer team. Vows were renewed to Father John on the feast of Saint John Bosco 1945."

The Salesians had taken over the work in Adelaide from a locally founded Congregation "The Brothers of Saint John The Baptist", which was subsequently disbanded. Many years later, Father Cornell was instrumental in keeping alive the memory of these good Brothers when a new Art and Craft wing at Salesian College, Brooklyn Park, was dedicated to them.

In January 1947 Brother Cornell began his four-year course of theological studies at Sunbury, but in April of that year the students of theology moved into the new house at Oakleigh together with the aspirants. "Here studies were happily mixed with teaching aspirants and milking cows," wrote Father Cornell many years later. Obviously this kind of theological training did not receive the approval of the Superiors in Italy, who in October of that year sent out orders for the students of theology to come to Italy where they could study theology "sul serio" (in earnest).

It may be of interest to note, in passing, that it was at the time of Father Cornell, as Provincial, in 1969, that the decision was made to keep the students of theology in Australia and make Oakleigh the house of formation for them. By then, of course, the aspirants were gone and there were no longer any cows to be milked!

For the next three years, Wallace Cornell is at the Theological Institute of Bollengo (Italy). There he received all the "orders" (minor and major as they were known in those days), including the priesthood. He was ordained on the 2 July 1950 and returned to Australia immediately to take up duties at Sunbury. The years of theological formation in Italy remained a high point in Father Cornell's life for the many lasting friendships he made in those years and for the love for Don Bosco and the Congregation he developed as he came in contact with some of the places that nurtured the origins of the Society and met some outstanding Salesians.

"I found the next two years after my ordination, as Catechist (R.E.C.) at Sunbury very happy ones," wrote Father Cornell in

his notes. And he continued: "In January 1953 I was in charge of a summer camp at Dromana, mentally preparing myself for another year at Sunbury. Father B. M. Fedrigotti (who had taken over from Father Ciantar as Provincial Delegate for Australia which was then part of the San Francisco Province) paid us a visit and, calling me aside for a moment as I was leading a group of boys to the beach, told me that he was sending me to Brooklyn Park (Adelaide) in a week's time, as . . . Rector!"

And so, at the age of 32, Father Cornell began a very long period of responsibility in positions of government and animation as Rector and Provincial, a period of almost 30 years with a break of only one year in 1963. It was during the years of Father Cornell's rectorship that the work of the Salesians at "Boys' Town" (as it was then known) was expanded to take in "day boys" from the local parish: this marked the beginnings of what is now "Salesian College", Brooklyn Park.

In 1957 the Salesians accepted a new secondary school at Port Pirie, some 280 km north of Adelaide, and Father Cornell was appointed the first Rector.

In 1958 the Australian Delegation was erected as a Province in its own right with Father B. M. Fedrigotti as the first Provincial. This gave the new Province the right of participation in the General Chapter. The First Provincial Chapter of the Australian Province elected Father Wallace Cornell as delegate to the Eighteenth General Chapter held in Turin in 1958. This was to be yet another "first" in the life of Father Cornell.

At the end of his six "happy years" as Rector at Port Pirie, Father Cornell was asked to take over the duties of Prefect (Bursar) at Salesian College, Chadstone. "Little did I think that this year (1963) would be the last for many years that I would be free of major responsibilities. It is a good thing that future events are kept hidden, otherwise it would be hard to saddle up," wrote Father Cornell many years later.

In January 1964 he was asked to take over as Rector at Chadstone. Father Cornell had hardly the time to move into the Rector's office, when a letter from the Rector Major (Father Zaggiotti) arrived the day before the Feast of Don Bosco (31 January), appointing him Provincial to replace Father B. M. Fedrigotti who was due to finish his term of office in February that year. Father Cornell recalled: "I went to this wonderful man (Father Fedrigotti) to ask for advice. He looked at me, smiled, and said: 'Accept! If Father Fedrigotti could be a Provincial, any old fool could be!' so I became a 'fool for Christ's sake'".

In the letter of acceptance to Father Zaggiotti, dated 31 January 1964, Father Cornell wrote: "I have always preached to others that we must be prepared to accept responsibilities without reservation, and now it's



my turn to put it into practice. In sincere and humble obedience I say 'fiat voluntas tua' and "may God help me." This statement captures that spirit of readiness and obedience based on faith, which was typical of Father Cornell throughout his life.

The years of Father Cornell's office as Provincial (between 1964 and 1970) coincided with some historical events that are worth recalling. At the level of the Church, in December 1965, Paul VI brought to a close the ecclesial event of the century — the Second Vatican Council — and launched the Church into a massive process of renewal which affected all fields of Christian life. At the level of the Congregation, the 19th. General Chapter in 1965 marked the end of a certain style of government in the Congregation and sowed the seeds of a new beginning. Father Cornell, who was a member of that Chapter, recalled some years later: "Salesians from all over the world were beginning to flex their muscles: the days of 'rubber stamp' General Chapters had come to an end!" Father Ricceri, elected Rector Major by the 19th. General Chapter, took the Congregation into a process of renewal which was to set the course for the second century of the "Salesian phenomenon" in the world.

At the level of the Province, the new house of Lysterfield was opened in 1964 as a novitiate and post-novitiate, while the first Regional College in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, St. Joseph's College at Ferntree Gully, was opened by the Salesians in 1965.

During these years the Province had some of the largest novitiates in its history, but at the same time several of the early pioneers were called to their eternal reward; amongst others were Father Fedrigotti (1964) and Father Ciantar (1967).

Father Cornell was always convinced that to send confreres to the missions was an enrichment for the Province and would draw God's blessings and the gift of new vocations. So, when the first appeals for missionaries for South America reached Australia, several confreres were allowed to fulfil their missionary dream, with the support of the Provincial.

During Father Cornell's last year in office (1969) the first of the "Special" Provincial Chapters, in preparation for the Special General Chapter, was held at Lysterfield.

In October 1969, Father Cornell himself announced to all the confreres in the Province the appointment of a New Provincial in the person of Father T. Jennings.

The Rector Major, Father Ricceri, in expressing the appreciation of the Congregation and of the Province to Father Cornell for his service of animation, wrote: "Many confreres expressed the wish that you should

be confirmed in office. We greatly appreciate this demonstration of trust, but, in keeping with a principle which we have decided to follow strictly, we feel that every Provincial should have a well-earned rest from office after serving for six years."

Towards the end of 1969 Father Cornell was considering what the future would hold for him. Several years later he wrote in his notes: "At the end of my term of office, I debated asking permission to change Provinces to remove myself completely from the scene, but fellow-feelings for my successor led me to accept the rectorship at Sunbury, where I was to spend six busy but challenging years."

The last circular of Father Cornell, written on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of 1969 and announcing the changes of personnel for 1970, contains a moving "valedictory" to his confreres.

"My dear confreres,

For the final time it is my duty to announce the appointments for the new year. Among the many duties that a Provincial has I have considered this the most demanding. The duty to ask a man to take up new duties, to change House, which often means an uprooting which bears its scars for many years, is a heavy one that I have felt deeply over these six years. It is the awareness that one is not dealing with figures on a draughtboard but with dedicated human beings — that every House must be staffed as adequately as possible with a limited number of men. It is a task that is not done on the eve of the Immaculate but which must be started months before, after personal inspection of the needs of the individuals and the Houses, after listening to any member of the Province who cares to speak to me on the matter and after much prayer. If I have hurt anybody by my requests over the six years I humbly beg pardon — if your appointment this year is hard to take, please remember, I have done my best for the needs of the individual Houses and for the Province as a whole. May you all be generous in your response not only in accepting the appointment but resolving here and now to make a success of your new appointment insofar as it lies in your power to do so."

In January 1970, no sooner had Father Cornell handed over the responsibility of Provincial to Father Jennings than he moved to Sunbury to take up his new role of Rector.

Father Cornell's approach to education and, in fact, to all life's challenges and problems, has always been "essentialist", that is, he stressed the essential and basic values of the Gospel and of the Preventive System. The following quotation, taken from the "Rector's



Message" in the 1970 Sunbury Annual, expresses well Father Cornell's approach to Catholic education: "If a Catholic education has not convinced you that self has no meaning apart from its relationship to God; that only God gives meaning to life; that happiness consists in uniting our will to the will of God, then you have missed the point!"

The impact that he made on the College is recorded in the annual magazine, in which the editors — a group of six senior boys — wrote: "To a large extent, our moral and spiritual development during the past year has been due to the guidance and influence of Father Cornell. In his first year as Rector of 'Rupertswood', Father has taken great pains in the task of giving us students a responsible role to fulfil in the College. For this, and for all the other forms of assistance he has so willingly rendered we thank him."

It seems to me that these boys had not missed the point of Father Cornell's educational convictions!

School life is always very absorbing and the years seem to go by very quickly amidst the usual occupations of teaching and educating, animating staff and putting up new buildings, helping senior students in making choices for life.

1975 was a special year for Father Cornell: it was his last year as Rector at Sunbury. The message that he sent to his past and present pupils as he left 'Rupertswood' reveals once again his deep concern for Catholic education and his clear vision of the aims and objectives of a Salesian School:

"As this is my last message to the students of 'Rupertswood' as Rector I would like to sum up the message I have tried to present over these six years.

"From the day on which you came for an interview with your parents, or, even before, from the very first letter I addressed to you and your parents, I hope you found me insisting upon the fact that you must live up to your lofty calling as Christians.

"As I hear from you or about you in the years to come, I am not going to get very excited if I hear that you have done brilliantly at the University; that you are bringing in a high pay packet every week; that you are playing full forward at Geelong! But I will be highly delighted if I hear that you are having a tremendous influence at the University because you are living out your Christianity; that your boss is loud in your praise as a fine, responsible and reliable employee; that even in sport you never forget that you are a Christian.











"You carry with you a tremendous responsibility and you will be judged by Almighty God on the way you have shouldered it. I will have to answer for the way I have tried to convince you of this. Let us pray for each other that we may receive the light to know what we should do and the courage to live according to that light no matter what it costs us.

"It remains for me to use that expression so often on the lips of St. John Bosco: 'May we all be united, one day, in heaven.'"  
(From: Annual Sales. Coll. Sunbury 1975, p.2)

In 1975 Father Cornell commemorated the Silver Jubilee of his ordination. The message on the commemorative card summed up well the feelings of the occasion with a quotation taken from Dag Hammarskjöld: "For all that has been — Thanks! For all that shall be — YES!" These words were not an idle and idealistic motto! On the contrary when Father Cornell chose them for his Silver Jubilee in July he had already been put to the test! For by then he had already been asked, and had accepted, to take on the duties of Provincial once again from January of the following year. "For all that shall be: YES!" Father Cornell's reply to the Rector Major was characteristic of the man: "I cannot say that I am happy, but I can certainly say that I am READY to accept and to do my best. When I made my first profession as a Salesian, it was my intention to do whatever the Superiors asked me to do, without conditions or reservations. I think that I can say that I have been faithful to my promise. I have often thought that others could do a better job than I, and this thought is very much in my mind at present; but 'trusting in your word, I shall cast the nets'. Even from now I promise fidelity to Don Bosco in his successor".

The announcement to the confreres was made by Father Jennings in a Circular of 18 July 1975. Father Provincial added the following comments, which at a distance of more than ten years, seem most appropriate:

"I rejoice with all the Province that our Superiors have given us such a tried and capable leader, a man of proven loyalty to Don Bosco and the Congregation, and one whose deep spirituality we all respect so much. But I am equally sure that I share the concern of all that the burden of this office is again laid on Father Cornell. The intervening years since 1970 have not been easy or restful for him. Now he is being asked once again to undertake this responsibility for us all. Surely the prayerful sympathy, the assurance of loyalty and co-operation of all goes out to Father Cornell at this moment."

The appointment came as no surprise to the confreres in the Province and to those who knew Father Cornell's proven record in spiritual



leadership. Archbishop Little wrote to congratulate Father Cornell and to offer his support: "You can rest assured of my continual interest and support during your term of office. Your Congregation is indeed fortunate to have a man of such vast experience and deep spirituality to continue the good work of your predecessor."

As the new year began, Father Cornell took over the responsibility of Provincial, determined to tackle the task "with courage and optimism" as he himself put it. In his first Circular on 31 January 1976, he proposed the guidelines under which he wanted to animate and govern the Province. It is worth reminding ourselves of the spiritual and Salesian heritage that Father Cornell has left to this Province.

"On the very day I commenced my term of office a senior member of the Province asked me when I was delivering my policy speech. Although it is a bit late for that exercise, I will attempt to give some of the programme I have set myself, a programme mapped out for me in the Constitutions and Regulations.

"I am very much aware that I must lead by the witness of my own life and 'in the spirit of service and fraternal union' help all the members of this Province to live according to the wishes of Vatican Two as expressed in paragraph 10 of Lumen Gentium 'All the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God, should present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Everywhere on earth they must bear witness to Christ and give an answer to those who seek an account of that hope of eternal life which is in them'.

"I will ENDEAVOUR to make the welfare of each member of the Province my primary concern. Whilst stating this, I know, even with the best will in the world, I will fall far short of what many have a right to expect and deserve but I hope I can always say that I have done my best.

"To make myself as fully available as possible, I will be leaning heavily on members of the Provincial Council, especially in such matters as financial administration, school administration and the like.

"As Regulation 132 points out I will make every effort to be a bond of union between the Province and the Superior Council.

"A demanding programme! Yes, so I will be counting heavily on your prayers and co-operation; on your advice and suggestions; on your fraternal corrections and on your sincere and constructive criticism.

“May we tackle the work ahead of us with COURAGE and OPTIMISM — this task which is both personal and communal of bringing ourselves and others closer and closer to Christ. In this regard let us recall to mind the advice of St. Francis de Sales, on whose feastday this first Circular of mine is written, as he is speaking of the temptation to be faint-hearted and pessimistic.”

Fairly early during his second term of office as Provincial, it became obvious that the burden of office and the constant pressure of government were taking their toll on Father Cornell's physical health. His arthritis in one foot and in the knees at times slowed him down considerably.

In 1977-78 Father Cornell took part in the 21st. General Chapter. His contribution to the Chapter was not outstanding — apart from one memorable “Good Night” and from his composition of the Chapter “anthem” sung to the tune of “Waltzing Matilda”! However, he worked solidly in his commission on the section on “schools” and, above all, he was instrumental in rallying support for a bigger effort on the part of the English-speaking Provinces to produce Salesian literature in English. One of the delegates recalled this recently when he wrote: “At the 21st. General Chapter there was much talk about Salesian reading material that could be available for the English-speaking world. I noticed that Father Cornell sat down to work and began producing one translation after another”. This activity became a second apostolate for Father Cornell up to the very end of his life. As a matter of fact, on the desk in his bedroom Father Cornell had left a book on St. Francis de Sales in Italian and next to it several handwritten pages of translation into English: this was his last effort the day before he died.

The 21st. General Chapter launched “Project Africa” in the Congregation. But the missionary project for the Australian Province was to be in the Pacific: Western Samoa. I remember vividly the occasion in which Father Cornell spoke to me about this project (I was then the delegate to the 21st. General Chapter). His whole approach was one of faith in Divine Providence, and obedience to the wishes of the newly-elected Rector Major, Father Vigano. Thus began “Project Samoa” under the leadership of Father Cornell. (I shall return later to this chapter of Father Cornell's life.) After his return from the Chapter Father Cornell visited Western Samoa and, as a result, a Salesian priest was posted to Samoa at the beginning of 1979.

Another “missionary” project which was dear to Father Cornell and which took shape during his second term of office was the Salesian presence in the Northern Territory, where a large number of Australian aboriginal people still live, often in miserable human conditions. Eventually the Salesians decided to accept the administration and pastoral care of the parish of Katherine, some 300 km south of Darwin.



During the final years of his term as Provincial, it became obvious that the process of renewal in the Church and the rapid changes in the lifestyle of clergy and religious caused a certain amount of anxiety in Father Cornell. He intensified his call for prayer and encouraged people, more by example than by public statements, to hold on to certain traditional practices which were still valid. However, he supported the need for genuine renewal and for ongoing formation and insisted on the importance of reading spiritual, religious and Salesian literature. Practically his last initiative as Provincial was to host the ongoing formation seminar for our confreres in Adelaide in December 1981 - January 1982.

His last Circular to the Confreres, in December 1981, is worth re-reading. I quote from it the salient parts:

"And so I come to my final Provincial Circular. The thought uppermost in my mind is one of grateful thanks to the men of this Province who have supported me, encouraged me and tolerated my many shortcomings.

"In deciding the appointments for 1982 I could not help being amazed and edified by the spirit of co-operation on the part of so many confreres, whether they were being asked to take on the burden of office or to accept duties with very little glamour and a lot of hard work.

"I beg the pardon of any confrere I may have hurt over these years by my thoughtlessness and disregard, for the time I have 'seen their eyes, but not seen their tears'. I can only rely on your prayers that if I have hindered God's work in individuals or in communities by my lack of vision, that damage may not be irreparable. If I have caused scandal by my myopic vision, by my lack of faith, by my poor projection of all that Don Bosco stands for, I can only beg pardon. It was not deliberate.

"In my communications with the Province I have tried to spell out the strengths and weaknesses that I have seen. The Strenna which the Rector Major has put before us for 1982 sums up all that I have said or written on this topic. It is so easy to lose the spirit of dedication, of work, of temperate living — it is human nature to replace it with all the trimmings of the 'good life'.

"If my term of office as Provincial is to be remembered (I am labouring under no illusions that it will be) I would like to make a plea that it be so for these reasons:

- that I tried to emphasise the necessity of getting to know Christ better if we are to make Christ better known. This can only be done by a deep spirit of prayer. We also need to

remember at all times that there is a person whose help is not only useful but essential — the Immaculate Mary, Help of Christians.

- that we must remember with gratitude the pioneer Salesians of this Province and build upon the solid foundations they have laid and not lightly destroy what they have built up.
- that we do have a special charism the depths of which we must continue to probe by a prayerful reading of Salesian literature right through our lives.

“Pray for me. I will never celebrate the Eucharist without remembering all those who have worked in the Province, those who are now working in this Province and those who will be working in it in the future which I hope and pray will be a glorious one.”

At the end of 1981, only a few months before concluding his term of office, Father Cornell discovered that he had high blood pressure. This prevented him from visiting our men in Western Samoa. However, in January 1982 he felt well enough to travel to Western Samoa to stay: he was to take over as Rector of the Moamoa Theological College. Even though he was only 60 years and a few months, he under-estimated his own level of “burn-out”. He lasted only four weeks in Samoa. By the middle of February 1982 he was begging me to be allowed to return to Australia before he suffered a mental and physical collapse. He was a broken man: that experience of “failure” was to leave a deep effect practically up to the very end of his days. In fact these are his own words annotated at the bottom of a copy of the letter he had sent me with the request to be withdrawn from Samoa: “Writing this letter was one of the most devastating events of my life: it was the first time I was asking to be relieved of an office. It could have been an act of cowardice and an unwillingness to trust in God. It is a stark reminder of my poverty, my weakness, my pride. This event has left in me a scar that will never heal this side of the fullness of life beyond — hopefully it will not separate me from the One I love with all the powers of my weakness! Miserere, Domine!”

After his return from Samoa in February 1982, Father Cornell spent the remainder of the year at Port Pirie, performing “light duties” and especially catching up with the past pupils of the early years of Salesian College (where Father Cornell was the Rector twenty-five years earlier!) and continuing his work of translation of Salesian literature into English.

At the end of 1982, when the novitiate and post-novitiate community lost its confessor in the person of Father Power, Father Cornell offered his services to that community, and so he was appointed confessor to



the formation community at Lysterfield. He spent three valuable years in that community: his example of prayer, his availability for the Sacrament of Reconciliation and for counselling, together with his teaching of Salesian history were much appreciated and gave him a sense of fulfilment. His health, too, improved a great deal, to the extent that he felt he could take on some more work. At the beginning of this year, I asked Father Cornell to take responsibility for the archives of the Province — he was very familiar with this type of work — and at the same time he was to try to establish the Salesian lay Institute of the Don Bosco Volunteers in Australia. It was thought that he could also continue his services for the formation communities both at Lysterfield and at Oakleigh. For this he agreed that it would be better for him to be a part of the community at Chadstone, which is on the same property as the Provincial House and the Theological College.

During the five months he lived at Chadstone Father Cornell seemed to have a new lease of life. Even the fact that he responded to the invitation to go to the United States for the appeals of the Propagation of the Faith through our Salesian Missions Office, was an indication of how much his health had improved. His own doctor was as surprised as all of us when he learnt of Father Cornell's sudden death through heart failure.

We were able to have Father Cornell's body flown back to Australia. A week after his death his remains were solemnly laid to rest alongside the other Salesian pioneers in our private cemetery in the grounds of our first Salesian house in Australia — Sunbury. The funeral Mass was attended by a large number of Salesians, members of the Salesian Family, all the surviving members of the Cornell family, many past pupils and friends. The Archbishop of Melbourne sent his apologies but one of his auxiliaries, Bishop Eric Perkins, was present in the sanctuary. Bishop De Campo of Port Pirie was represented by his Vicar General, Mons. Don Victory.

Letters and messages of sympathy were received from several Bishops and Major Superiors around the country and tributes of esteem and affection arrived from past pupils, friends and admirers. The Rector Major offered the Province his condolences and the assurance of a special memento "for a dear friend, always so attentive in remembering those occasions that build up the family spirit — a confrere who deserves the gratitude of the Province and of the Salesian Family in Australia".

This Province owes Father Cornell an enormous debt of gratitude for the many years of exemplary Salesian life, most of them spent in demanding positions of animation and leadership, sometimes even to the breaking point. This example will remain as a witness of his fidelity and dedication to God and to the young, and speaks more eloquently than many Circulars and conferences.

I would like to single out and highlight a few characteristics of Father Cornell's personality and service.

1. He loved God's nature — the trees, the roses, the flowers: he knew their names, he tended them with care and enjoyed their silent beauty. They were an expression of God's own life-giving and evergreen presence in the world.
2. As a person he seemed to possess a great measure of self-control: the Salesian motto of "WORK and TEMPERANCE" had a living exponent in Father Cornell. He cherished a sense of "regularity" in his life — no doubt as a result of the type of formation he received but also of personal effort to follow a style of life which reflected great respect for tradition and stability.
3. As a religious, God occupied the first place in Father Cornell's life. He belonged to the "old" school that shaped the great Salesian apostles of the past: men of deep but simple faith, of prayer and mortification, of devotion to Our Lady, the Pope and the Eucharist.
4. As a Salesian, his preferred form of youth apostolate was through school education. He was convinced that Salesian schools offered wonderful opportunities for the formation of Christian leaders and for fostering vocations.
5. He developed a genuine love for Don Bosco and worked tirelessly to make him known, especially through his writings which he translated for the benefit of English-speaking readers. His latest contribution in this field was a three-volume work of documentation, compiled from Church documents and Salesian sources, on the Constitutions. Copies of this work were sent to all the Provinces of the English-speaking and Asian regions of the Congregation. The response was unanimously positive and full of appreciation for such a thorough and painstaking work.

In terms of human and spiritual achievements, we could well apply to Father Cornell the following description by R. L. Stevenson:

That man is a success  
who has lived well, laughed often and loved much;  
who has gained the respect of intelligent men and the love of  
children;  
who has filled his niche and accomplished his task;  
who leaves the world better than he found it whether by an  
improved poppy, a perfect poem or a rescued soul;



who never lacked appreciation of earth's beauty or failed to express it;  
who looked for the best in others and gave the best he had.

I would like to conclude this letter with a tribute written by one of his fellow-novices (Father K. O'Leary), as a dedication in the Annual Magazine of Salesian College, Chadstone, for the year 1981.

"I was a fellow novice of Father Cornell in the first Salesian novitiate here in Australia. We were part of both the pioneering community at Brooklyn Park, South Australia, and in Port Pirie. In a sense I feel specially qualified to write this dedication.

"The whole Salesian province owes an immense debt of gratitude for what Father Cornell has contributed to it — especially in his two terms as Provincial.

"However, it is not high office itself that bespeaks worth. It is the quiet strength, the patience, the justice and the kindness which marked his relationship with others that stamp him as a Salesian in the 'think well of all, speak well of all, do good to all' tradition.

"It is intriguing how we each carry our own special impression of people, a mental vignette which highlights the relevant characteristic for us. Father Cornell, for a long time, wore a 'handed down' Australian Light Horse slouch hat. Not one of those modern smaller versions, but a big generous broad-brimmed hat. It was part of his farm/garden working gear and seemed to me to mark him as somebody solidly Australian. It seemed to set him off as 'no nonsense fair dinkum'.

"There is a risk in writing a dedication. It can become platitudinous and its very attempt to show worth and esteem may defeat its own purpose. Nevertheless, Father Cornell is deeply respected by all who know him in the Province and beyond. It is for the few things I have spoken of and for many more stirring qualities generally unsung, that this community, in the Silver Jubilee of the College, dedicates the 1981 Year Book to Father Cornell in recognition and prayerful gratitude."

The memory, the writings, the leadership, and above all the example of Father Cornell will remain alive for many years to come, since his life and work are an integral part of the history of this Province.

Many people expressed the hope and the prayer that this Province may be enriched by many more Salesians of the calibre of Father Cornell.

May I take this opportunity to thank the Confreres of the Provincial House and of the Missions Office in New Rochelle for the care and solicitude which they showed to Father Cornell in life and in death.

In asking for continued prayers for the repose of his soul, may I also invite you all to include the intention that Our Lady may continue to send us vocations of the quality of Father Cornell so that Don Bosco's work may grow and expand throughout Australia and the countries of the Pacific.

Father F. Bertagnolli  
Provincial

**Father Wallace L. Cornell SDB**

Born.....17 May 1921  
Professed.....31 January 1942  
Ordained.....2 July 1950  
Died.....10 July 1986

He was a Rector for 16 years  
and Provincial for 12 years

