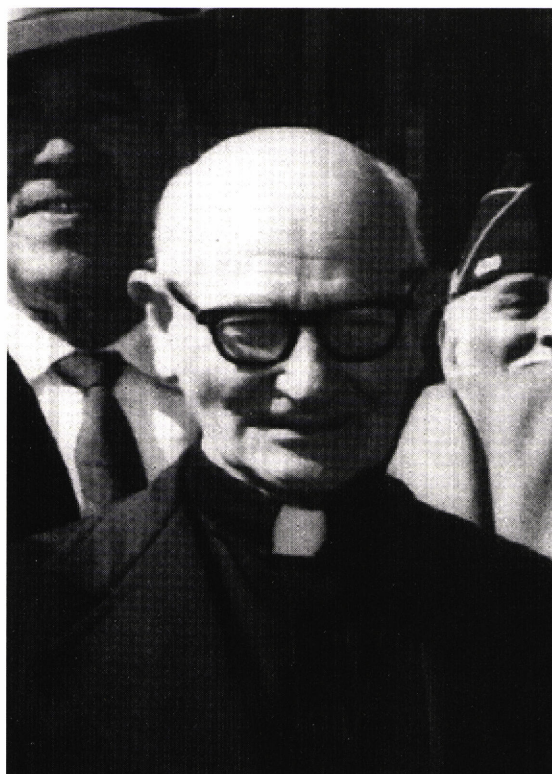




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Fr. Joseph Costanzo, S.D.B.



Father Joseph Costanzo, renowned pastor, orator and missionary, was called to his eternal rest on August 5, 1982. He was visiting the Central Valley of California and was helping at St. Brigid Church in Hanford, during the month of August. He had just finished presiding at a funeral and was preparing to set out to preach a

retreat for the Italian Catholic Federation [I.C.F.] when he was felled by a massive heart attack.

Joseph was born November 6, 1900, in Milan, Italy, the first of three children of Lina Romano, a native of Florence, and Giuseppe Costanzo, a native of Augusta, Sicily. He was baptized on the day of his

birth in the church of St. Vincent de Paul in Milan. His elementary schooling was in Florence. In 1914 the family moved to Turin and Joseph entered the Salesian Oratory at Valdocco. The next year he transferred to Valsalice a couple of miles east on the other side of the Po River. He entered the novitiate at Foglizzo in 1916. In 1917 he made his first vows as a Salesian. From 1917 to 1920 he studied philosophy and did his practical training and first year of theology at Martinetto, Turin.



At Engadine (Australia), 1955

Bro. Joseph arrived in New Rochelle, New York on August 14, 1921. There he continued his theological studies and professed his perpetual vows on March 9, 1922. A year later, he received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Fordham University in New York. He was ordained on September 20, 1924, in St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York City, by

As a young cleric in New Rochelle, 1921



Patrick Cardinal Hayes.

An Apostle in Action

Fr. Joseph Costanzo, a little [5'3"] fireball of enthusiasm and motion, began his priestly work by teaching for four years at Salesian High School in New Rochelle. Fr. James Collins, in his memoirs, relates two items about Fr. Joseph. He was a great writer and invariably filled every square inch of the chalk board with notes. And during the yearly retreat the students were asked to keep silence [recollection] for one hour during the day. The boys were given marbles to play with in the yard during this hour. The younger boys did just that but the older boys kept some for later. That night, when the lights

went out in the dormitory, they rolled the marbles along the length of the wooden floor. At the "Good Night," following night prayers the next evening, Fr. Joseph hopped on the stage and said: "You know, boys, as I was getting into bed somebody dropped a shoe on the floor in the dormitory above me. I waited for the second shoe to fall but then there were hundreds of things being dropped from one end of the dormitory to the other. Boys, that's not a nice thing to do. Good Night!"

From the first days of his youth work he was known as "Pop" even though he was a young man. This was a manifestation of his fatherliness. Although the sobriquet later did not travel across the continent with him there were some in later years who knew him as "Pops" and he enjoyed that familiarity.

As a blazing meteor streaking across the sky attracts the eye, so Fr. Joseph caught the eye of his superiors and in 1928 he began a career of responsibility as director, pastor, animator and model for those who knew and worked with him. In that year he was appointed the Director of Salesian High School in New Rochelle. The post was not a big change for him since, in the years preceding, the Provincial retained the title of Director and Fr. Joseph was the treasurer. With the Provincial relinquishing the title of Director in 1928, Fr. Joseph continued as he had been doing with the addition of a greater fatherly concern and service to his community.

Just a year later in 1929, he was appointed



With Fr. A. Tozzi, Provincial, in Watsonville

Director of the newly established Don Bosco Seminary in Newton, New Jersey. This post he held for the next six years with a year as Director of Novices thrown in. In 1935 he was back as Director of Salesian High School in New Rochelle. He held this post for six years. Then in 1941, he received his first pastoral experience with a one-year stint as Director and Pastor at St. Anthony Parish in Paterson, New Jersey. But there must have been something about Fr. Joseph that drew him to New Rochelle. In 1942 he once again became Director of Salesian High School, this time for two years.

In 1944, Fr. Costanzo began his San Francisco Province Odyssey. He was appointed Pastor of SS. Peter and Paul Church, which was the Italian National Church in San Francisco. Fr. Joseph was in his glory. It was there that he could wax eloquent with his Italian compatriots. It was there that he blossomed as a pastoral apostle. SS. Peter and Paul was home for the next eleven years but it was not without its cares. He inherited a church deeply in debt. Yet, through his enthusiasm and optimism the church became solvent.

He spearheaded the project of decorat-



With Fr. A. Cagliandro, Provincial, in Aptos

ing the interior of the church, which up to that time, was rather drab. When the scaffolding came down, after months of work, how the church glittered! From Christ the Pantocrator in the dome over the high altar to the detail work of the Corinthian capitals on the columns to the frescoes of Salesian saints, there was not a surface that did not delight the eye. With good reason SS. Peter and Paul is a favorite and a tourist attraction. Later, Fr. Joseph, enhanced the side altars, added polychrome marble statues and mosaics which reflect a richness of art and devotion.

In 1955 he was sent as Pastor to the Salesian parish in Engadine, Sydney, Australia. Australia at the time was part of the San Francisco Province, and became a province in its own right in 1958. After two years, he was recalled to California and appointed director of the Salesian Theological College in Aptos, California in 1957.

In 1959 he was asked to leave the country once again and become an assistant pastor at Sacred Heart Church in Vancouver,

British Columbia, Canada, which had a large Italian congregation. Fr. Joseph was fond of saying that: "My superiors sent me to Newton where I lost my patience. They sent me to Canada, where I lost my hair. Then they sent me to Australia, where I lost my teeth [that kangaroo meat was tough]!" He remained in Vancouver until he was asked to return to California and assume a position with the Italian Catholic Federation. He was

appointed an I.C.F. Missionary and in this capacity helped organize a number of I.C.F. branches throughout California as well as provide spiritual help for the members of the organization.

In 1961 he returned to SS. Peter and Paul Church as Pastor where he remained until 1970 when he was appointed the vice-Provincial of the San Francisco Province. From 1971 to 1972 he was Director of Salesian High School in East Los Angeles. He returned to North Beach and SS. Peter and Paul in 1972 where he was Pastor, Director and Vice-Provincial until 1978.

His last years were spent again as a Missionary for the I.C.F. His support for causes Italian was well known. A low income residence for elderly Italians in the North Beach area, "**Casa Costanzo**," became a reality thanks to his work and zeal. It remains in operation today. He was always willing to lend his support whenever asked for help by anyone-rich or poor alike.

In spite of his many activities, he still found time to tape a weekly television program in Italian. He preached God's word and commented on local and worldwide happenings with an Italian slant.

Those who were favored with the ability to understand the Italian language found a personal view of the man's life during the short span when he preached in his native tongue. His sermon came from the heart; it never was simply an exercise

in public speaking or a time slot on a schedule that must be filled. He threw himself into communication with his audience as though nothing else mattered. His presence was totally here and now; his direction was towards the spiritual and the eternal.

His style was dramatic; the pitch of his voice oscillated widely; the volume was loud! Out of the pulpit, he retained many of these qualities—dramatic, wide-ranging, and articulate.

He was totally committed to God, to people, to Church, and to community. He was loved and will be long remembered for his humility and his simple, yet almost mystical, religious fervor.

A Man For All Seasons

Fr. Joseph Costanzo was a Salesian priest after the heart of St. John Bosco, and he did not know the meaning of discrimination. He gave himself to Italian young people, first of all, because they were the ones to whom he was sent, as well as to



Welcoming V. R. Luigi Ricceri at the airport of San Francisco, California

the Italian Catholic Federation in his later years, but while he was pastor of the Italian National Church of Ss. Peter and Paul he was the first to recognize the rights of the rapidly growing Chinese community. He gave to the two Salesian Chinese priests who arrived to minister to the Chinese community the best time slot for their Mass in his Sunday schedule. The Italian parochial school soon became the most attractive Chinese Catholic school in the area. And, previously when he was the Director of the Salesian Seminary College of Newton, New Jersey, he was "all things to all men," Irish, Polish, Italian, English, French and they all loved him as "Pop," for that is what he was for every one who came in contact with him.

For those who remember him in his later years, it may be difficult to appreciate him as one of the most outstanding persons of the Italian Community of San Francisco. There is no doubt that he assumed such an aura, as he would have done in any group to which he might have been attached, for he was a personage who immediately



Posing with V. R. Renato Ziggotti, Rector Major in Richmond, California, 1955

stood out and to whom everyone was attracted. In fact, a former provincial of his expressed the fact that he was a joy to work with, and had quietly offered to take any place that another might find difficult because of location or people. His availability resulted in his being sent to Australia and to Canada during part of his career. When missionaries were being sought for Africa, Fr. Costanzo was one of the first to volunteer! No matter where he was sent he fit in with those to whom he was directed by Obedience. He had no choice of place nor of persons, but he stood out among any who received him and he became a father and friend to all.

Fr. Joseph Costanzo died at 2:20 p.m. on August 5, 1982 at the local hospital in Hanford, California. The Salesian Family is grateful to Fr. Edward Poschen, Pastor of St. Brigid Church, for being with him when he breathed his last. Fr. Joseph was far from established Salesian centers and died so suddenly that no confrere could be with him. And yet that also characterized him: working for the cause of Jesus and His Church

anywhere, at any time, even off the beaten track.

Funeral Services—An Unforgettable Tribute

The wake for Fr. Costanzo took place at 7:30 p.m. on Sunday, August 8, at Ss. Peter and Paul Church. Some thoughts on Fr. Costanzo were expressed by our confrere Fr. Michael Ribotta during the vigil

service.

"After 81 years of life, Fr. Costanzo has at last gone home. In his lifetime as pastor, missionary, and Salesian confrere, he touched the lives of all of us in many unforgettable ways.

"As PASTOR of Ss. Peter and Paul, a church he loved and which with much hard work and sacrifice he brought to completion, he was truly the loving shepherd of his people. For over a quarter of a century he served this community of faith. His priestly zeal, care for the sick, his moving and eloquent sermons all left a deep imprint.

"As a MISSIONARY (a term he lovingly used) with the Italian Catholic Federation, it seemed that he never rested. He drove endless miles, spent endless hours evangelizing and organizing until his name became a byword in the Italian-American community.

"If any Salesian confrere lived the Salesian motto *DA MIHI ANIMAS CAETERA*

TOLLE, which translates: “**my only interest in life is the good of souls**” it was indeed Fr. Costanzo.

“As much as I admired his personal saintly ways, to me his human side will always be memorable. Always supportive, never critical; rejoicing in (another’s) good fortune or sharing (another’s) dark moments. HE WAS A BEAUTIFUL HUMAN BEING.

“There was a SIMPLICITY about this man that was both compelling and attractive. Very much like the disciple Nathaniel in the Gospel of St. John he was a man ‘in whom there was no guile..’.”

The Mass of Christian Burial was on Monday, August 8th, at 7:30 p.m. It was a triumphal occasion for Fr. Joseph Costanzo and for all the Salesians and faithful who were present to say farewell to a beloved confrere, pastor and friend who had moved and worked with such youthful energy and enthusiasm up to the moment of his death as to belie the many, many years he had devoted to his confreres, his people, and to his Church. The huge church of Ss. Peter and Paul, which has often been called the “Italian Cathedral,” was filled to the doors with those same people to whom he had given so much.

Five bishops were among the throng that came to pay him honor (Joseph McGucken, Archbishop of San Francisco, Mark Hurley, Bishop of Santa Rosa, William McDonald, Daniel Walsh, auxiliaries of San Francisco, and Bishop James Daly, Auxiliary Bishop of Rockville Center, NY). a score of Monsignori and former provincials, and sixty priests concelebrated Mass in memory of their be-

loved friend. And the people who gathered with them gave proof that he had given himself to them, the living Church. Fr. Carmine Vairo, provincial, was the principal celebrant at the Mass of Christian Burial.

Fr. John Malloy, former provincial, gave the eulogy. The following are excerpts of his sermon:

“Fr. Costanzo came to his happy smiling disposition certainly not by nature only. A Sicilian of explosive temperament, a volcano ready to erupt (Mt. Etna! ?), he had to do violence to himself to control this restless energy. I remember, not without a twinge of guilt, how some of us young priests, working with him, exploited this characteristic. We would wait till he would get upset about something (probably of our own making) and then ask him for some special favor. He never refused! I suppose he would have granted our requests anyway but we knew that he was most generous just after he had lost his patience!

“The Leonardo Da Vinci Society gave one of its landmark presentations in 1975. They staged Goldoni’s classic *Il Burbero Benefico* (The Kind Hearted Grouch) Fr. Costanzo, in 18th century period costume, played the lead role of Geronte. The part seemed to have been written for him. He literally brought down the house at each performance.

“His wisdom was thoroughly nurtured. One of the [images] of Fr. Costanzo was seeing him standing at a podium in his room avidly reading a book with pencil in hand to underline impressive phrases and ideas, and adding his own comments from time to time. The pages were thoroughly ru-

ined but so well impressed on his brain! That's why he could speak for hours (and often did!) on almost any topic, especially if it were Gospel related. [Throughout his life everything interested him: philosophy and theology, mathematics and literature, music and art.]

"Father Costanzo died on a feast of Our Blessed Lady. [August 5th is the feast of the Dedication of St. Mary Major, the great Marian church in Rome.]. How he loved the Madonna. How much he relished the celebration of her feasts. For us this has a special significance and lessens the pain of loss that we feel in our hearts. Our Blessed Mother is now presenting this faithful servant to her son!"

Memories and Recollections

1) Fr. Larry Lorenzoni, SDB., Development Office

"My very first encounter with Fr.

Ground breaking, Salesian Boys' Club, San Francisco, California



Costanzo was at Watsonville, in 1943. A youngster had asked me for the time and, as it happened, my pocket watch was out of commission, so I asked Fr. Costanzo what time it was. 'You need a watch, man,' he said. 'Here, use this one. I'll find another one somewhere.' He took off his wristwatch and gave it to me. That's the watch I used till I was ordained.

"My last memory of him was the Monday morning he left for Hanford. He spent twenty-five minutes looking over my shoulder and asking questions about the word processing system on our new computer. That's Fr. Costanzo in a nutshell: completely detached, totally involved.

"Twice during the last two years he asked me to type out in English his official annual I.C.F. activities report, detailing week by week his work with the various Federation branches. Believe me, those activities would have taxed the energies of a man half his age. But Fr. Costanzo was also involved with a weekly TV talk, with taping Masses, visits to the elderly and to the hospitalized. How a man in his eighties could manage to do all that will forever remain a mystery to me. He thought nothing of driving from San Francisco to Las Vegas and back for the I.C.F. Convention. I stopped counting the times he drove from San Francisco to Los Angeles, or to Montclair, or to Hanford. We found it hard to talk him out of driving to Chicago! His strong heart could only take so much. He died as he had lived. In a hurry.

"'Don't be afraid,' Fr. Costanzo seems to be reassuring us, 'It's like I always told you. *Eh, buon Dio!* God is good! It's really a laugh! Yes, joy, love and truth forever!'

"Father Joseph Costanzo: a genuine human being, a convinced Christian, a prince of a priest. Everyone loved him. He loved everyone. He was strict with himself because he believed, lenient and liberal with others because he loved."

2) Fr. Gabriel Zavattaro, successor to Fr. Costanzo as pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul, recalls: "Father Costanzo's life was nurtured by the spirit of charity. The love of God and love of neighbor were fused in him in one sole love that urged him to dedicate himself entirely to a life of Christian apostolate. In preaching he was dominated by the Spirit and succeeded to communicate this infusion to his hearers, possessing them, attracting them and helping them to be in the presence of God."

"His support of Italian causes is well known. He was personally thanked in San Francisco by the Mayor of Florence for his help to the victims in Florence of the 1966 Arno River flood. He helped raise money for the Palace of Fine Arts reconstruction project. The Columbus Day Celebration Committee was indebted to him because he was always willing to lend his support whenever he was asked."

"But it is the youth of North Beach that had the warmest place in the heart of this energetic disciple of St. John Bosco. Fr. Costanzo, who loved nothing better than to see throngs of boys and girls drawn to the church, gave his constant pastoral support to the use and development of the facilities of the Salesian Boys' and Girls' Club annexed to the church and to the SS. Peter and Paul Elementary School located in rooms above the church."

TRIBUTES FROM DIGNITARIES

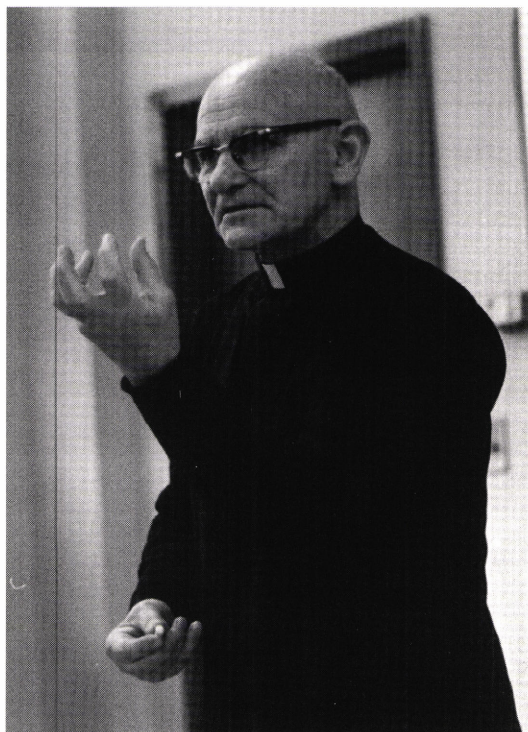
The following tributes for Fr. Costanzo with condolences were received, among many, from the following:

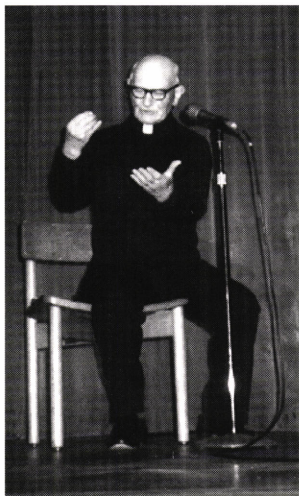
THE CONSUL GENERAL OF ITALY

"...As Representative of the Republic of Italy, in expressing my sentiments of sincere sorrow I am also speaking on behalf of the thousand of Italians and Americans of Italian origin who, throughout the years, came to love and admire Father Costanzo and considered him an almost essential part of their daily and spiritual life."

Our beloved Father Costanzo will be long remembered for his exceptional qualities, his

Explaining the "essence" of the Spiritual Life





Making a Point at PAD I, 1980

Francisco sent this message on August 11, 1982 to Fr. Provincial:

"The members of the Board, with a profound sense of civic and personal loss, are conscious of the many fine qualities of heart and mind which distinguished and brought justifiable appreciation to Reverend Costanzo in the community."

Sincerely,
John L. Taylor
Clerk of the Board

Another dear friend of Fr. Costanzo and zealous co-worker in the city of San Francisco, wrote on August 10, 1982:

common touch and his warm loving ways. I am certain that there will always be a special place in our hearts reserved for the memory of a truly inspiring messenger of Christ."

Alessandro Vattani
Consul General
of Italy

The Board of Supervisors of San

"Upon countless hearts and minds he has left the mark of a dedicated man, truly religious, a priest ever faithful to the Church, a happy soul. Long ago I used to enjoy talking and joking with him in Italian.

"Father Costanzo has been a blessing to our City, a vigorous and colorful part of the very personality of San Francisco. So may he long remain'".

Falher Alfred Boeddeker, O. F. M.

Dear Confreres, though late in communicating the passing of this wonderful Salesian, I ask that this recalling of the active life of Fr. Joseph Costanzo, fired by the Holy Spirit, may always be an inspiration to all of us. Please pray for this province

The "Italian Cathedral of the West" in North Beach



community that the Lord may continue to raise up among us apostles like Fr. Costanzo.

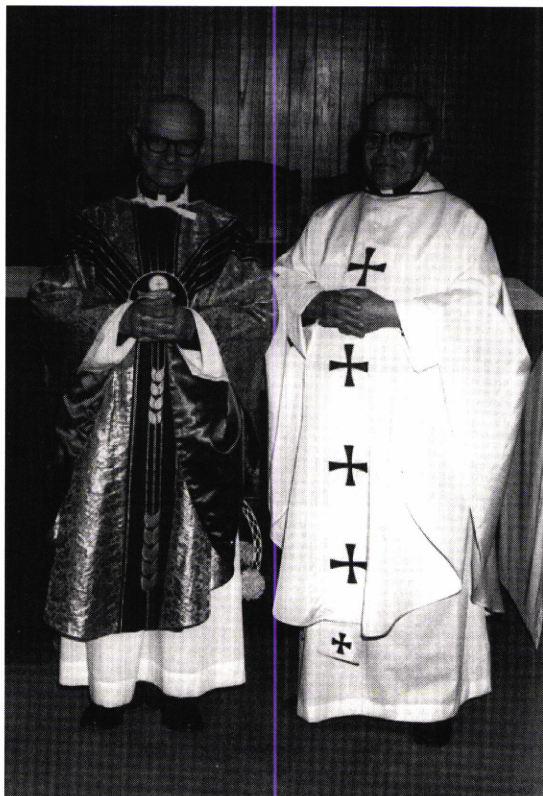
Fr. Mario Mich, SDB
Director of the Provincial Residence
San Francisco, CA
May 1996

Note: Thanks to all those who contributed information that was so useful in putting together this obituary letter. This great Salesian figure deserves a biography, which I hope will be written in the future.



Fr. Costanzo "Pop" in his lighter moments

Fr. Costanzo and Fr. Attilio Giovannini vested for Mass in Watsonville



Fr. Joseph Costanzo, SDB

Born: November 6, 1900
Milan, Italy

Professed: September 15, 1917
Turin, Italy

Ordained: Sept. 20 1924
New York, New York

Died: August 5, 1982
Hanford, California



Salesians of St. John Bosco

SAN FRANCISCO PROVINCE
1100 Franklin Street
San Francisco, California, 94109