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# *Peter Angelo Dezani* *SDB*



*SALESIAN BROTHER*  
*2-4-1925 - 9-11-2000*





Near midnight on Thursday, the 9th November in the Jubilee year 2000, in a palliative care hospital in Hobart, close to his Salesian home of the last thirty five years, Brother Peter Angelo Dezani SDB slipped quietly into the eternal embrace of the Lord. He was in his 75th year of life and 56th of profession. He had received his final anointing just two hours before, three priests from his community praying over him, and one had begun the final night's prayer vigil with him when he peacefully passed away.

On his death certificate, his doctor simply wrote the cause as non-Hodgkins lymphoma and exhaustion. After so many years of dedicated work and physical disability, his body finally surrendered to the rigours which had long been attacking it and which had become an intense burden in his final two years of life. He had suffered since a child from osteomyelitis which had progressively crippled his hips and legs and had patiently endured the rigours of chemotherapy with the onset of the lymphoma in his second last year of life, but his doctor's prognosis was still hopeful and his death came with only a couple of hours warning.

News of his passing quickly spread, particularly through the Old Scholars network, the main group with whom he had ministered so tirelessly for so many years, including through his final illness, and the four hundred seats in the Dominic College chapel were insufficient to hold the vast congregation who came to celebrate his life and mourn his passing at his solemn Tasmanian requiem some days later. Then the Salesian province finally farewelled him with mass of burial and laid his body to rest in our Salesian cemetery at Rupertswood in Victoria.

Peter was born on 2nd April 1925 in Camerano in the province of Asti, Italy, not all that far from Don Bosco's home area. He later joked that this was a year of terrible storms which destroyed much of the local vineyards and fellow villagers told him he must have been the cause of it. He had two sisters and a brother. One of his sisters died before Peter was born and his brother Angelo passed away some time before him. Peter's mother had died when he was just nine years old, and his surviving sister, Anna, became the mama of the family and a deep bond between the siblings grew. Anna is still the 'matron' of the old family house in Camerano. Peter lost his father just ten years after he came to Australia, but fortunately had been able to visit him in Italy a few months before.

He often reminisced about a fundamentally happy childhood, growing up in a small town of about 1500 people who all knew each other. But when he was just three, the young daughter of one of his neighbours lost control of a bicycle and crashed into him as he was sitting outside the family home and injured one of his legs, which became infected and the infection developed into osteomyelitis. The young Peter was unable to walk for nearly a year. He recounted, I remember I used to go to kindergarten and the doctor would go over there to dress my leg. But apart from having pain now and then I was very happy. Superficially, the leg healed for a time, but the osteomyelitis later recurred with ulcers which required nursing attention for the rest of his life and insidiously twisted and crippled his lower body. Peter's pain and increasing immobility became a chronic cross for him, but he never complained of it, never lost his underlying happiness nor his welcoming smile.



Bouts of illness from the leg and difficulties following his mother's early death resulted in a lot of time being missed at school and Peter was already 13 when he completed Grade 5. Meanwhile the Camerano parish priest often used stories from Don Bosco's life in his Catechism classes and visits and these impressed Peter so much he quickly accepted an invitation later to go to the Salesian aspirantate in Rebaudengo. In an interview for the Australian Salesian Bulletin in 1990, he said: Well, first of all I have to tell you that I can make decisions very easily. When I went to the College I liked the place. I really felt part of whatever was going on. I remember during the War there was very little to eat, very few amusements and holidays. We led our own life and I liked that. I carried on because I chose it myself and also because I liked the life. I always thought about Don Bosco as a very reasonable man. The Parish Priest, when I was young, used to tell us about the life of Don Bosco in the evenings and on winter nights. We used to play in the presbytery and then read a little bit of the Bible. When I went to College I made my decision. Little else swayed me from it, even though when I went to the novitiate, I had trouble again with my leg. I went to hospital for about six months, then I had to stay home. But apart from those little difficulties I put myself right into the Salesian way of life. At Rebaudengo it was a very good family. We knew everybody, and everybody knew us. We supported each other. . . . I wanted to learn woodwork but there was no room because I was late, probably a month later than the others, so I took on shoe making and did it for at least ten years.

At Rebaudengo, what was to become a close life-long friendship with Silvio Quaranta, was consolidated. The two would study and train together and soon, as newly professed Salesians, join the Australian Province together. Bro Silvio comments: He was a man of music and song in school in Turin. At school he played the part of the drummer boy, in the full brass, reeds, wind, and percussion instrument band. On the sideline he learned to play the clarinet. Later on too, coming into possession of a violin, he set out to master that too. Peter had discovered a special joy in this nurturing Salesian environment at Rebaudengo and in the novitiate at Novi Ligure in 1943-44. Intensification of the war in Italy forced the novices to move halfway through to Borgo San Martino. Again Peter takes up the story: The memories of the war stand out more than anything else. We had to stay indoors for three years, we never went out because the Germans would take people from the street and send them to Germany. It was a simple life, we could make our own entertainment and carry on with work and training.

Following novitiate, Bro Peter returned to Rebaudengo to complete his initial formation. When both he and Silvio were given their mission assignments to Australia, they raced to consult both an atlas and an encyclopaedia to work out where this new frontier country lay and what life there might be like! He then gained some practical experience in Ivrea, Bagnolo and Villa Moglia, bid another farewell to his family and, with Bro Silvio, set sail in 1948 from Genoa for New York and thence railed across the continent for a short stint in San Francisco. At that time, Australia was part of the Western United States province.



Bro Peter Swain travelled up to Sydney to meet the two new migrants and accompany them on another long train trip down to Melbourne and, after a few months of English study under the tutelage of Fr Cerutti, they were posted to the Boys' Home in Brooklyn Park, South Australia. This was baptism by full immersion: continuing to learn English at the same time as teaching shoe-making to the boys and general assistance. Then apprenticeship legislation stepped in and put a halt to the shoemaking classes. But when doors appeared to close in Peter Dezani's face, he soon found side tracks! So he went to the South Australian School of Mines and finally began the woodwork course he had missed before in Italy. After completing that, with some metal work and technical drawing thrown in as well, he received his accreditation as a teacher.

In his 'spare' time he put his musical talents to good use and formed a little orchestra of brass, woodwind and guitars with the boys. And to complete the show, he became choirmaster for a time and staged a musical. The leg problem was pushed into the background during these energetic young adult years and Bro Silvio remembers his enthusiasm and strength: Nothing stopped him; he was into everything, not missing any



opportunity to do good. Being a natural when it came to sport he was into football, cricket and baseball. He had a strong arm; no one would have wanted to be hit by one of his throws. It would have been like being hit by a Poison Ball. A hunter and gatherer he was. With the senior boys, during the summer holiday camps, he went spear fishing, using gear which he had made himself. We were in a Salesian house together for some 15 years, what a blessing that was for me!

Like his biblical namesake, Peter was also developing into a gatherer of people. During his sojourn in San Francisco, he had found an old discarded typewriter and cleaned it up with a toothbrush and kerosene. He carried it with him to Adelaide and here, feeling a sense of isolation in this huge land, so far from his bella Italia, he began to type stencils and establish a circular to link Salesians spread across four States. The Link was born and still continues to inform and entertain Salesians in Australia, the Pacific and well beyond.

From 1955-1956 he was assigned to the Don Bosco Boys' Club and Hostel in Brunswick, Victoria. He did not in later years speak so effusively of this time (which in itself is saying something), mentioning only being present at some of the athletic events (as a spectator) in the Melbourne Olympic Games of 1956.

Then in 1957 he returned to Brooklyn Park to teach technical drawing and woodwork for the next nine years. During this time he discovered what was later to become his dominant ministry: working with Old Scholars. A reunion of past students was held in Brooklyn Park in 1957 and with the support of Fr Cornell (then Rector and soon to be Provincial), a meeting and recreation area for them was carved out of a former dormitory, proving a very successful focus of attraction. A national association of Old Boys soon came to birth and Bro Peter rarely missed the annual conferences.



In 1966, as if mainland Australia was not sufficiently far from Piedmont, Peter Dezani came to Glenorchy, in the island State of Tasmania. Here he would remain till his death and become a veritable institution. He again took up teaching woodwork and technical drawing in what was then Savio College and gave assistance in the boarding house. He recalled spending Saturday mornings doing a milk run to some of the other local boarding schools, helping earn some income through the small Savio farm, managed by Fr O'Sullivan and the boys. For a time he also served as bursar to the community. Together with Fr Michael Jackson, he found an interest in collecting and polishing gem stones. The College had an old inn set up as a holiday house at Swansea, on the coast, and the two Salesians, with a group of boys in tow, would fossick for stones in the local creeks. What evidently began as a ruse to keep the boys busy with simple exploration and fun then grew into hobby time classes to make Christmas and birthday presents for their mums. Peter used similar inventiveness within and beyond his woodwork classes, running lessons for boys, and later girls and then parents and friends, after school hours. Many can still show gifts ranging from back scratchers or letter openers to walking or candle sticks crafted either by Bro Peter himself or under his tutelage. Most also carry little inscribed sayings ranging from the humorous ("Don't go riding alone; always take a horse") to verses from scripture. Just another little trick to let a word in the ear linger longer before the eye.

It was in the woodwork room that some legendary moments occurred. Always extremely thrifty in both his own practice of poverty and his expectations of his students, he wasted or discarded almost nothing. So when a boy was about to place some timber off-cuts in the rubbish bin, Bro Peter warned, Don't throw that wood away; it doesn't grow on trees you know! Moreover, his body, already progressively crippling through the osteomyelitis, was further injured with the loss of two fingers in separate woodworking machinery accidents. His simple request, Get me a Bandaids please, after losing the top of one finger in the thicknesser, remains over a generation later in student folklore. Most of the Salesians who taught woodwork in the early years of the Salesian colleges in Australia show similar maiming, but for Peter such injuries held more pervasive implications and arthritis gave him pain now in the hands as well as legs and hips and progressively sapped the strength he was once noted for.

The woodwork shop had been inserted in the basement under the new science wing. Tunnelling larger cellars under family houses in Camerano was a long tradition in that part of the world and Peter soon saw possibilities for another basement area behind the school hall. With a band of volunteers and conscripts, he literally dug out a recreation centre which quickly was dubbed the Rat Hole by the students. The old back stage rooms became an office and smaller meeting room for the Old Boys. And later, when climbing the stairs to the Salesian rooms above the school became too onerous and risky, a room adjoining the office was converted into an ensuite bedroom for him. The Rat Hole became Bro Peter's incontestable domain.





Here the Brooklyn Park formula was reincarnated into an area where the students could gather under Peter's watchful eye and words during class breaks, and old scholars and friends could readily find him. The physical setting was firmly in place and so was Bro Peter, giving first priority to visitors from near and far. He became a superb guest master, welcoming all, never hurried, keen to listen to their stories and swap yarns with them. He built up an ever larger store of photo albums (now 277 of them) gathering both photographs and newspaper clippings from the early days of Boys' Town, through the Savio College years to Dominic College. He carefully scanned the morning paper for any mention of present and former students and staff and took photos of all who visited. He made sure his guests signed the visitors' book and updated their address so a firm contact network was established. While carefully entertaining them during their visits, he never lost sight of his original goal of bringing people together, keeping them linked and informed, maintaining a family tie with the College, the Salesians and each other.

DOSA NEWS was established, like the early Link, as the networking channel of the Dominic Old Scholars Association and has so far run to 178 editions. However, Peter's quest for making sure all people were included was not quite so well matched with as keen a goal in strict editorial accuracy. Sometimes the wrong people were reported as engaged to each other. And like the wood not growing on trees incident, syntax and spelling were infamously well off the list of publication priorities. But it spread the word, and the word was well received.

The Rathole (and that name will probably stick with further generations of students) is now The Brother Peter Dezani Recreation Centre and many younger students particularly, find joy, fun and refuge in there during class breaks. On the walls a mere photo of Brother Peter and some of his hand written sayings are the inadequate continuation of his personal guiding presence there. Somehow these days, a walking assistant does not have the same presence as the King of the Rats in his chariot.

And that chariot, Peter's electric scooter, had become synonymous with him in his final ten years of life. It replaced the twisted and suffering legs which progressively became able to carry him fewer and fewer paces. Ironically enough these wheels gave him the final mobility of which the child neighbour's bicycle had increasingly deprived him so long before. As with any other ailment or obstacle in his path, his native stubbornness did not accept defeat in his plans for work and ministry. Already in his sixties, he underwent surgery on his spine in an attempt to correct progressive crippling and convalesced spending many weeks in a traction harness literally screwed into his skull. Again in his own lyrical language he called it his crown of thorns, yet patiently and philosophically he didn't just endure, but smiled his bedridden time through this new via crucis. One got the distinct impression his visitors felt more discomfort looking at him than he ever adverted to. He had learned to accept chronic pain and incapacity over many years and this new trial seemed to provide an even deeper spiritual well from which to encourage patience and acceptance of God's will in those who kept meeting with him. He would quickly turn the conversation to another focus away from himself. And in the long periods of solitude, when reading was difficult, he would pray his rosary, many of the decades perhaps shorter when he counted on his abbreviated fingers rather than his beads.

The surgery was only a partial success and his hips and legs became more twisted and less mobile. So the community and the Old Scholars chipped in and a three wheeler scooter was bought for him. This provided a new lease of life but was obviously designed for a less adventurous invalid. He overturned a few times forging longer pathways from the residence and rathole down to the football oval where he could be with the Old Scholars teams and spectators. And whilst his stubborn resilience was a boon in keeping him buoyant in adversity, its shadow side was destructive in other, particularly mechanical, contexts.





The college photocopier invariably needed major surgery after he had controlled the DOSA News print run with his walking stick, and his car driving had previously been known to keep several panel beaters in steady work in Hobart. And now an unsubtle approach to the speed control of the chariot was beginning to make him look like he'd been wiped out in the big race in Ben Hur. So the three wheeler was traded for a four wheeler, which in turn was abandoned with cracked axels in the racing pit and an even more heavy duty model bought to better cope with his adventures and his increasing weight (which he long insisted was a sign God was ever more abundantly blessing him).

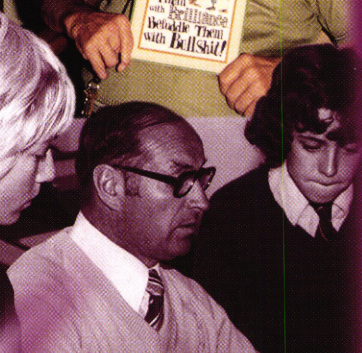
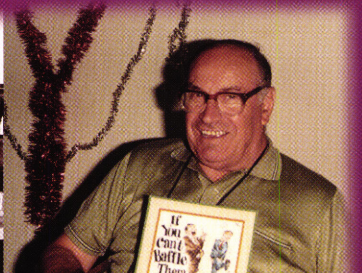
Whatever the weather (and Hobart winter mornings can be very daunting) Peter would climb on and steer his chariot faithfully down 400 metres of driveway for morning mass and for evening prayer and dinner. The core Salesian practices of piety were essential mainstays in his life. Even when his eyesight began to fail and reading without a magnifier became impossible, he would faithfully be there in chapel, joining in the prayers he knew and following, as he would express it, in pectore, the psalms and other parts of the Liturgy of the Hours. More tolerant than excited about less conventional prayer styles, he would, however, sing heartily if any of the 'golden oldies' (especially Latin) hymns happened to be used. He retained a good singing voice; his rhythm, particularly in maintaining unison with others in choir, was not quite so remarkable! And he liked a few well chosen words from homilists and presiders but would later let the offending celebrants know if he felt things were too verbose or appeared to lose the plot.

As in the Rathole, Peter in many ways tended also to preside at community table, even if others thought they may have been leading a conversation. He was never short for a line or sixteen of comments and would instigate or join in almost any topic. He was genuinely interested in people and had a least a passing interest, and certainly an opinion, on most events. The main times he would grow silent were when discussion seemed to be getting too close to driving him into a tight corner or else was denigrating; then he would simply raise his glass and say, Cheers! and we all knew this meant change the topic! Similarly he would not be explicitly drawn on commenting on the relative merits and drawbacks of his various rectors, other than commenting several times that rectors come and go (while he stayed) and the good ones just happened to be the dead ones. He also managed to intersperse a persistent repertoire of Italian words and phrases in his English conversation and new members of the community would well have been helped with a dictionary of 'Dezaniense' in their first weeks of meals in Glenorchy. Until the chemotherapy robbed his appetite, he loved his food and wine, loved the company and conversation that went with it, and was a most accomplished chef in his own right. As in the chapel, we, the Glenorchy community, are the poorer for his absence at table.

Perhaps one more memorable skill ought to be mentioned because, like so many others, it points to a deeper interest. The skill was his adroitness, by utilising his missing fingers, in miscounting years to his next visit home to his bella Italia. At least until illness made it too painful for him to travel far, he cherished these five-yearly visits (with the interval often abbreviated) with his beloved family in Camerano. And rarely would he use these trips as opportunities to go further abroad – it was straight home where his boyhood bedroom remained preserved for him. He is survived by his sister and nieces and their families, and the beautiful words they sent from Asti to be shared at his requiem in Hobart and the depths in which they continue to cherish him, evoke the love and esteem in which he was and is held in his family of origin. This reflects also the love in which he held them and gives insight into the love with which he embraced generations of students, families, Old Scholars and confrere throughout his fifty six years of Salesian life. Modelling himself on Don Bosco, he loved and enabled us to know we were loved. Again following the saint to whom he had given his life, he died prematurely exhausted in his seventies, worn out by illness and apostolic work, yet never immersed in his own suffering, rather still loving and living for youth and for the Old Scholars earlier generations of youth had become.

Peter has had his bread and work, let's continue to pray for him that, having also endured suffering so courageously for so long, he is speedily awarded Don Bosco's final promise and rests eternally in heaven.





**Data for the Necrology**

**Br Peter Angelo Dezani**  
75 years of age,  
56 years of profession.

