

Dear Confrères and Friends,

Once again the Thornleigh Community appeal to you for your charitable remembrances and prayers. In rapid succession we have lost four highly esteemed members; Father Walter Fairclough in 1981 on Christmas Day, a year later Father Collinson, Brother Thomas Gallacher in April of this year, and now again in 1984, on July 31st.

FATHER PATRICK ERSKINE SDB

The first three who died gave us some advance warning; Father Patrick, however, while sparing us the anxiety of anticipation, has left us to recover as best we can from the shock of his unexpected passing.

On the morning of Tuesday, July 31st, he was his usual breezy self. He had arranged to say a morning Mass in the convent where he was Chaplain, in order to leave himself free to celebrate in the evening our Community Day festivity. On his return from the convent, he helped with the shopping, to assist the Bursar, and it was on his way back from this chore that he had a slight accident a few hundred yards from the College. By a happy chance, it was our Parish Priest, Mgr John O'Connor, who was first on the scene. He helped Father Pat from the car and sat him on a low wall by the roadside before, as a precautionary measure only, ringing for an ambulance. As Father Pat had suffered no physical injuries in the accident, he was able to enter the ambulance unassisted and waved cheerfully to Mgr O'Connor as he was driven to the hospital. Shortly afterwards, partly as a result of shock and partly as a consequence of his diabetic condition, he had a severe heart attack. When I called to see him, he was in intensive care and indeed remained in that care until the end. Despite the unremitting attention of doctors and nursing staff he died in the evening of the same day.

Patrick Erskine was born in Bootle, on March 8th, 1909 in the parish of St. Alexander, the third of eight children of staunch Catholic parents. As a boy of thirteen he went down to the Salesian College at Battersea; that great gatherer of likely vocations, Father Peter McConville, had seen behind the Liverpool 'cockiness' of the lad and 'won' him for the Salesians. At sixteen, in 1925, Patrick became a Novice at Burwash. After profession and philosophy, he spent his triennium of training in Pallaskenry, Ireland and, again, at Burwash; his theological studies he did in Battersea and Shrigley, being ordained priest on August 25th, 1935, at the age of 26.

Father Patrick specialised in French and taught that language in many Salesian Houses for almost the next forty years: Battersea, Bolton, Malta, Burwash, Battersea again, Cowley-Oxford during the war, back again to Battersea. In 1953 and 1954, he went to teach at Port à Binson and St. Dizier in France. More years of teaching led to the office of Bursar at Bootle from 1966 to 1969; after another spell of teaching, he worked as Bursar in Farnborough for two years, and finally as Bursar at Thornleigh from 1973 until September 1982. For the past two years, he has been acting as assistant Bursar to Father Tuberet.

As was said by the preachers and many others at the funeral, there was much to be thankful for in the passing of this dedicated Salesian. There was, as we have seen, the remarkable volume and variety of his work over a lifetime. Even when in his latter years, an advanced diabetic condition sapped much of his energy and mobility, he could still call on reserves of strength and spirit to undertake duties apart from his office work. He was Chaplain to the Sisters in Hollymount: he undertook regular relief work, much of it residential, in parishes far and near; he was our representative at Deanery Conferences, and never shrank from the humbler chores of serving at table and washing-up if necessary.

In a variety of other ways, we at Thornleigh have benefitted from Father Pat's lively presence among us and from his example. His prayer life was intense but uncomplicated. He had little time for novelties; his spirituality was Mass-centred and Marian. He was frequently to be seen in the College chapel, first a prayer before the Blessed Sacrament and then a slow walk to the end of the chapel where he would kneel for a few moments at the shrine of Mary Help of Christians, which he personally had helped to set up. He loved the chapel as it is, only regretting that it does not have a statue of his favourite Saint, St. Joseph. I am sure, however, that in the many 'travellers' who come to our front door or the back kitchen window, he found St. Joseph, for as Bursar, he treated each and every one, no matter how incredible or ridiculous their story, with respect and compassion, turning no-one away hungry or empty-handed. In the words of the Psalmist, "Open-handed, he gave to the poor."

I am equally sure that it was St. Joseph, the patron of a happy death, who saw to it that Father Pat, despite the short notice, died with all the Sacraments and comfort that the Church has to offer at the crucial moment of death. When I went to him for the last time his first enquiry was whether we had had a good meal – he had not forgotten that it was our Community Feast Day! He then asked for the Sacraments of the Dying. He knew he was dying but was fully conscious, answering the prayers and co-operating in every way, even to the point of himself removing the oxygen mask to receive the Holy Viaticum. As I was finishing the prayers for the dying he smiled his thanks and good-bye, before the doctor and the nurses took over. Within half an hour of my leaving his bedside, he had gone to receive the reward which Our Blessed Lord promises to those who serve Him in those He has entrusted to our care, the generations of pupils, the faithful in the churches, the poor at the gate, "Well done, good and faithful servant".

I should now like to take this opportunity of thanking his Lordship Bishop Burke, our Provincial Father Cyril Kennedy, Dean Canon Dorrán, Mgr O'Connor our Parish Priest, the many Bolton clergy and Salesian confrères who concelebrated the funeral Mass with us. The presence, too, of so many nuns, college staff, co-operators, past pupils and personal friends was also deeply appreciated by Father Pat's family and by our own Community. We thank you all for your Masses, your tributes, your prayers and your sympathy. Since none of us can expect to go through life unsullied, or deserve to enter Heaven without purgation, may I recommend Father Patrick to your continued prayers and remembrances in Holy Mass. And please pray also for the Thornleigh Community, especially for our work and witness in the school, that many more vocations may come from the ranks of the boys to replace the men we have lost and ensure that we maintain an active Salesian presence in this fruitful part of Lancashire.

Fraternally yours in Don Bosco,
James Conway, SDB, Rector

DATA FOR THE NECROLOGY:

Sac. Patrick Erskine

Nato a Bootle (Inghilterra) 8/3/1909

MORTO a BOLTON (Inghilterra) 31/7/1984

75 anni di età . . . 57 anni di professione . . . 49 di sacerdozio.