

Thornleigh House,  
Bolton.

Dear Confreres,

It is with particular sorrow that I write of the death of our dear

**FR. WALTER JOSEPH FAIRCLOUGH. S. D. B.**

For some years he had been suffering from a serious heart condition which, he well knew, could cause a collapse that would be sudden and fatal. On Christmas Day, 1981, a day of bitter cold and deep snow, Fr. Joseph said Midnight Mass for the Sisters at Tottington. During the dark hours of the early morning his heart gave him a sharp warning, prompting his Act of Contrition and "In Manus Tuas, Domine. . . ." But he recovered and was able to offer the other two Christmas Masses. At breakfast he remarked to the anxious Sisters with his usual smile, "It would have been a lovely day to die on wouldn't it?" After a light lunch he went across to nearby Accrington to greet his three sisters and then drove to Bolton to be in time for the Solemn Benediction. As he was putting the car away in the Thornleigh garage God's call came, the labouring heart collapsed, with instantaneous finality. The Benediction was to come from God Himself, not in time but in eternity.

Walter Joseph Fairclough was born in Blackburn, on December 1st 1914, his parents Robert and Ann, nee Eccles; his mother would recall with Catholic pride her family relationship to St. John Rigby, one of the Lancashire martyrs. There were five girls, with Walter the only boy. His vocation seems to have come early. The family remembers that when he was nine, his class was set an essay. "What do you want to be?" Walter wrote with no doubts: "When I grow up I am going to be a priest".

His school, of which he always spoke with particular affection, was St. Mary's, Blackburn, conducted by the Marist Fathers. Walter was a keen member of School teams and it was at cricket and football that he met his first Salesians at Thornleigh. For many years Don Bosco has found a fruitful harvest from a close group of Lancashire towns, such as Accrington, Blackburn, Bolton, Wigan, and young Walter was attracted by the many Salesian priests he met and whose Masses he served. So, in spite of his Jesuit Parish and his Marist education he applied to join the Salesians and entered Cowley, Oxford in January 1933. His Novitiate began later that same year: he made his first profession in 1934 and his final vows in 1940. After his philosophy, he spent three years in the Novitiate at Beckford as assistant to the Novice Master. His theology took him to Blaisdon and he was ordained during the war at Womersley on June 3rd 1944.

Fr. Fairclough was always known in his Salesian life by his second name, as Fr. Joseph Fairclough. Even though he might have been a little spoiled by his five sisters, as a boy he was always interested in the running of the home. He willingly took his share of the household chores and even learnt something of the mysteries of cooking, an accomplishment that stood him in good stead in later years. His practical bent soon revealed itself as a Salesian and he would cheerfully tackle any problem of maintenance. After ordination he spent five years at Chertsey, first on the teaching staff and then, from 1946-9 as bursar. Later in 1949, he was transferred to South Africa, spending three years in the Salesian School at Lansdowne, near Cape Town as bursar. At the end of 1952 he set off with Fr. Stubbings to found the school and mission of what was then Bremersdorp, now known as Manzini, Swaziland. This was the first entirely African school in the Province. Living conditions were hard, resources scarce, the work new and difficult. But Fr. Joseph always looked back at it with nostalgia. Africa fascinated him.

The year 1954 saw him back, somewhat reluctantly, in England, at the newly opened Theological studentate at Melchet Court; from there he attended the Technical College at nearby Southampton to gain qualifications in building construction. For the next eighteen years he served competently as bursar in Blaisdon, Battersea, Cowley and Bolton.

In 1973 he was appointed Provincial Economist, a post he filled with considerable expertise for six years. In this position he had to deal with a large cross-section of people, of business men, lawyers, bankers, educational authorities. His smiling courtesy and habitual calm won him many friends, with respect and indeed affection from people who would normally have little or nothing in common with a Catholic priest. For his Salesian confreres, his wide administrative experience was always a ready help; for harassed Bursars and worried Rectors, he was always a refuge in need; he was concerned with everyone's difficulties and did his best to cope with all problems. He listened with sympathy and often found a solution.

However, he was not without his personal problems. From time to time, he had to spend long periods in hospital lying on hard boards, with back trouble. And in later years, there came the heart condition which gradually worsened and at times left him breathless, in great pain, and unable for a few minutes to speak or move. He fully understood that death could come for him, in Our Lord's words, "like a thief in the night" and his spiritual life was governed by that probability.

By 1979, it was thought that possibly the rectorship of Thornleigh, Bolton, would prove less of a strain than the wider care of the provincial economy; but after a year, it was evident that his precarious state of health made it impossible for him to continue. He stayed on at Thornleigh, doing what he could, concerned with everyone until the end.

In his last year, Fr. Joseph was a popular, dedicated and much loved chaplain of the Sisters in Hollymount, Bury. During the Requiem Mass, the Sisters gave a moving and fitting tribute by singing as a community the "Hail Mary". There was no one in the congregation who was not convinced at that beautiful moment that Our Lady had indeed come to welcome home her devoted Salesian son.

The Solemn Requiem Mass at Thornleigh was a triumph indeed of music and prayer. Joined by many diocesan clergy, Fr. Fairclough's Salesian confreres made fifty-eight concelebrants at the Mass presided over by the Provincial Economist, Fr. Michael Power, deputising for the Provincial, absent in Liberia. The school chapel was packed with Fr. Joseph's friends from far and wide: they came in love to share in the Church's consoling farewell to one of her faithful servants. Even the Catholic undertaker remarked that it was a "happy funeral" Fr. Joseph was, at his sisters' request, buried near his parents at Pleasington Priory in Blackburn.

All his Salesian life Fr. Fairclough was a true son of Don Bosco, a model of "work and temperance" – but God's judgements are not ours and we must remember this fellow-Salesian in our Masses and prayers.

Begging for this warm charity and asking you to remember, also, the needs of this House and Province.

James Conway. (Rector)

Necrology: Fr. Walter Joseph Fairclough born in Blackburn on the 1st December 1914, died in Bolton on the 25th of December 1981, in the 47th year of his profession and the 37th of his priesthood.

R. I. P.