

St. Patrick's Salesian School,
Sliema - Malta.

August 1984.

FATHER CARMEL FENECH. S. D. B.

Dear Confreres,

It is with great regret that the Community of St. Patrick's, Malta, announces the death of our dearly beloved confrere, Fr. Carmel Fenech, whom the Lord called to his eternal reward in the early hours of Friday, 1st June 1984. He had been away from St. Patrick's for the last ten months: a short period in hospital and the remainder in the Corpus Christi home for the clergy, where he left an edifying impression of his saintly life.

Carmel Fenech was born in Birkirkara, Malta, on the 30th November 1899 to Francis and Paula, nee' Aquilina. His mother died prematurely at the age of 26, leaving her husband with four young children to rear. It seemed that the only practical solution was that they should be placed in an institution. Whilst arrangements were being made to admit Carmel to St. Joseph's Institute, Hamrun, St. Patrick's was also mentioned as a possibility. Unfortunately for Carmel this was not the place for boys of good behaviour, so his father suggested to him that at the interview he should show liveliness and possibly to be cheeky or get up to some mischief such as banging or kicking a chair.

Fr. Fenech, recalling this episode, stated that he had always obeyed his father but on that particular occasion he did not feel that he could do so. But since Providence had its hand on Carmel, he did manage to get admitted to St. Patrick's School. So, at the age of ten he made his first contact with the Salesians of Don Bosco. Diligent at school and at his trade as a tailor, later as a printer, he remained there for a period of twelve years; eight as a student and four as an aspirant. He always remembered those years with pleasure and gratitude to God, cherishing that period of his life as a particular grace from God, who then called him to follow Don Bosco for the rest of his life.

"In nineteen hundred and ten" was always the way Fr. Fenech started his speeches whenever he was invited by his confreres to say a few words on the occasion of a family feast. It had become a great delight for us to hear again and again from him the story of his early childhood and how he had become a religious and lived to the full his priestly consecration in the Salesian apostolic mission.

In recalling the early days at St. Patrick's he always remembered with profound gratitude those who had helped him in his vocation. Bro. Alfred Cauchi, the first Maltese Salesian and his printing instructor; Fr. Patrick Sherlock, who was his assistant and Fr. Patrick O'Grady, the first Rector of St. Patrick's. Our little Carmel started noticing how the first small group of Salesians in Malta really loved each other and how they shared their daily life with a group of needy boys like himself. This was the first step towards his vocation. He often remembered how not all the boys of his time were good boys, but he always chose the company of the better ones. With one or two of these he started talking to the Rector about his vocation. The group even talked to the Rector Major, Fr. Paul Albera, who visited Malta in 1913. Some sort of arrangements were to be made for these first aspirants the following year, but the Great War broke out and things came to a standstill.

Reaching the age of eighteen, the time to leave school, the young Carmel was ever more convinced of his Salesian vocation, and, as the war was nearing its end, Fr. Fenech started his real aspirantate in St. Patrick's doing the work of a Brother, teaching assisting and taking care of the chapel. In 1922 he left Malta for Sicily to start his novitiate at St. Gregorio di Catania. A little

episode is remembered here. In the few days that preceded the novitiate he encountered some difficulty; he was already doing the work of a Brother in Malta, but in Sicily he found himself back among the boys. He wrote a letter to his Rector in Malta saying that he was already determined to return to Malta. Fortunately the letter was never posted. After his night prayers he tore it up. He made his first profession in 1923 and the following year he started his philosophical studies. In 1925 we find him back in Malta – at the Oratory of St. Alphonsus, Sliema, teaching at the Secondary School. In 1927 the Superiors sent him to Turin, to the Salesian Studentate of Crocetta for his final theological studies. He was ordained a priest in 1931.

In the following year we find him at the Studentate of Messina as Professor of Moral Theology and Church History. In 1932 he was back in Malta for good to begin his long thirty-four year apostolate at the Oratory, before passing to St. Patrick's in 1966 for the last years of his life. During this long period, very many boys received from him a basic christian formation on which they could build their future.

Fr. Fenech was by nature a kind man; a goodness more readily found in the little ones with whom he easily mixed, becoming one with them in word and behaviour. At the same time he was a very spiritual man, very recollected and prayerful. He always prepared his lessons well, dedicating long hours to teaching. Every day –in the afternoon – he was at the Oratory, preparing catechists for eleven classes, and teaching catechism himself; guiding various associations, catering for the altar servers, choir, aided by Bro. Carmelo Galea, and seemingly ever-present in his corner of the playground. But much of his apostolate was dedicated to hearing confessions; an apostolate which grew in intensity in later years with his advancing age.

Fr. Fenech was also a man of sound study habits. He had a degree in dogmatic theology but he also kept himself up to date in moral theology so as to keep up with the needs of modern times and be an effective guide of souls, especially in the sacrament of Reconciliation. He was above all a very good religious and always punctual in his practices of piety.

In 1966 Fr. Fenech received an obedience which he found very difficult. He was asked to move to St. Patrick's. For him, having to leave the Oratory was just like dying. His main occupation in those last eighteen years was hearing confessions of the boys, confreres and the many who came to him at St. Patrick's. For many he seemed to be just the person to reconcile them with God. In 1981, thankful to God for his priestly vocation, he celebrated the Golden Jubilee of his ordination with great solemnity and joy.

His health began to deteriorate only in the year before he died. In August 1983 he had to be taken to hospital after suffering a heart attack. When he recovered somewhat he was transferred to the Clergy Home at Birkirkara as he was in need of continual assistance. He used to call this place an earthly paradise, describing the Sisters who looked after him as his "angels". He much appreciated the frequent visits from the confreres and so many friends. He always expressed a particular joy when the boys and aspirants came to see him.

Fr. Fenech passed away serenely on the 1st June 1984. At the news all felt deeply sad at losing a father, a friend, a companion. But our sadness soon turned to joy for we were all convinced that we had gained a new friend and intercessor in heaven. His funeral, which took place in the Oratory chapel was a Salesian triumph. All the confreres concelebrated Mass with the Provincial Delegate, Fr. C. Cini, who finished his homily by inviting us to listen to Fr. Fenech's voice on tape recommending our devotion to Our Lady.

Fr. Fenech's voice will for long remain alive in the hearts of all who knew him. A last homage paid to Fr. Fenech was that of being carried shoulder-high by young men of the Oratory while the Salesian Boys' Brigade provided a guard of honour and a final salute.

We all feel sure that, in the house of the Father, Don Bosco was waiting for Fr. Fenech with another "Guard of Honour" and a well-merited reward from the Lord for his saintly life on earth. While we recommend his soul to your prayers, we ask you to pray also for our community.

Fr. Carmel Zammit. S. D. B. (Rector)