



Fr John Foster SDB died on 10 March 2017 at Naas General Hospital, Co. Kildare around one o'clock in the morning. His end was preceded by a fall outside the front door of his community in Crumlin in December 2016, which resulted in him spending several weeks – including his birthday and Christmas Day – in St James's Hospital, Dublin, where he endeared himself to visitors and staff as he asked them in a kindly and friendly way, "...and how are you?", or interested himself in the work of the doctors and nurses as he sat near the nurses' desk in the corridor.

As his dementia had progressed, he was in need of long-term care and moved to the Suncroft Lodge Nursing Home in The Curragh, in his own native county of Kildare. He was to spend only one month in his new abode as he showed rapid signs of deterioration and was struck by an infection that necessitated his removal to Naas General Hospital where he spent the last week of his earthly life surrounded by the care and attention of the hospital staff, his family and Salesian confreres.

John Foster was born in Ballykelly, Monasterevan, Co. Kildare, on Saturday 10 December 1927. His parents Bernard and Kate (née Fitzgerald) had twelve children: Maura, Johnny,

Betty, Peter, Anna, Esther, Tess, Phil, P.J., Bernard (Bernie), Vera and Rosaleen. His father was a union official in the local mill and Johnny often sat in at meetings and saw his father in action.

Johnny went to the local Christian Brothers School in Monasterevan and then to their school in Portarlinton, ever ready in later years to stoutly defend the good name of the Brothers and say *he* had never seen the Brothers use any corporal punishment in his day.

He delighted in recounting how he would walk a Protestant girl – “a neighbour’s child” – home from school along the canal in the afternoon.

His father sent him to market but Johnny said he hadn’t a clue about the finer points of sealing a bargain. He would become quite emotional when he spoke about his mother and how she had quizzed him to make sure it was his own decision to pursue a vocation to the Salesian priesthood, and when she was satisfied that it was, she told him to kneel down and join her in a *Hail Mary*.

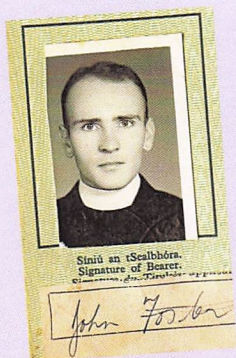
IN DON BOSCO’S FOOTSTEPS

Fr T.P. O’Connor assessed Johnny’s call to be a Salesian by asking him could he milk a cow! As an aspirant in Salesian College, Pallaskenry where he arrived in 1943, he relished the early morning rising to do the milking on the farm and the hearty breakfast that ensued, and he proudly stated he had been given the task of being guardian angel to the young John E. Butler when he arrived as a bewildered and retiring aspirant! Johnny finished his secondary schooling with the Higher School certificate, Cambridge.

After his year’s novitiate 1947-1948 with Fr James Simonetti as novice master in Beckford, Gloucester, in the beautiful vale of Evesham, in the south west of England, Johnny made his first profession as a Salesian on 8 September 1948.

A short time later the then provincial Fr Frederick V. Couche spoke with Johnny and told him he would be going to Hong Kong since he had signed the ‘Golden Book’ in the novitiate, which was understood as volunteering (unwittingly for him!) to go on the Salesian missions. When Johnny expressed his surprise, Fr Couche enquired how many brothers and sisters were left at home. On hearing the answer, his reply that he ‘wouldn’t be missed’ – however it was meant – hurt Johnny very deeply and he carried that with him for the rest of his life.

Johnny paid a quick visit home to say farewell to his parents and family. Before he and Br Paddy Deane from Kerry began their journey from London, the provincial economist of the time took whatever money Johnny had gathered in Ireland during his visit off him, and the two clerics found themselves on the P&O SS *Carthage*, en route to Hong Kong with little more than £5 in their pockets for a journey that would take them several weeks, arriving finally in Hong Kong on 14 February 1949. That trip was forever embedded in Johnny’s mind, and he recounted endlessly in his later years how the two clerics would win some money to help them survive by playing darts at night with fellow passengers who were well oiled at the time! In particular Johnny struck up a



Left:
Br John Foster's
1953 passport



Right:
**Ordination Day,
Melchet Court, Romsey, Hants,
13 July 1958**

The newly ordained Fr John Foster
with his mother Kate.

friendship with a young lady who seemed to be in distress and she found him very helpful and protective. He retold the episode so many times, it was impossible to move the story beyond the ship! And as Fr John Horan remarked to Johnny on one retelling, it seemed to have been more than a passing relationship!

ON MISSION

His time in Hong Kong began with the study of philosophy and teacher training in the studentate in Shaukiwan 1949-51, and it was commented that he was the only one who had not wanted to learn Chinese during his time in the studentate. His time in practical training 1951-1954 in St Louis School, West Point was so fondly remembered by his pupils that Anthony O wrote of those days with gratitude: "Brother Foster arrived in Hong Kong in 1949. His initial duties at the School were to supervise the boarding students together with Brother Bogadek who came to Hong Kong at about the same time, and taught English and History to Grade 8. He continued to teach the same subjects in 1951 to Form 1 of the Class of 1956. He was always standing ready during recess for a chat, and often drew a crowd around him. He soon came across to the students somewhat different from the other priests, that he had a heart of gold, was passionate, sincere with an innate sense of humour, and liberal-minded. At times he could be outspoken to a fault, and let his tempers be known. These, as we learned later, were the typical traits of the Irish temperament. Such an obliging personality easily earned him

the affection and friendship of many. Nostalgic moments abound that evoke fond memories of times spent with him. One day a group of us stood around him shivering in the cold. He pumped out his chest and said, "Stand like this and you won't feel the cold."

AMONG THE PIONEERING GIANTS

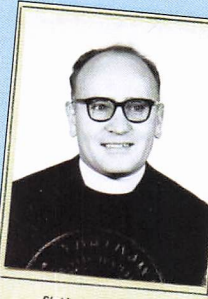
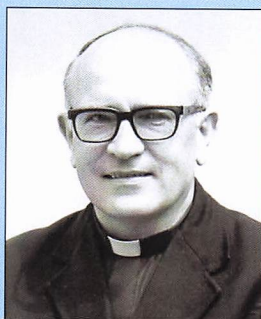
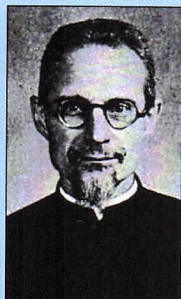
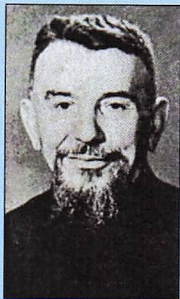
It is interesting to note that he made his second temporary profession in Hong Kong-Shaukiwan (1951) into the hands of the then Provincial Fr Charles Braga, a Servant of God whose cause for beatification has been introduced. Fr Braga was Provincial of the Salesian province of China for twenty two years and during his time the Salesian work in China spread in a marvellous way. He then went on to work in The Philippines. The comments on Br John Foster at that time say he had good health, ordinary piety, sufficient but little application to study, of an independent mind and loved relating with people outside - something he carried with him to the grave!

His perpetual profession in Hong Kong-Aberdeen (1954) was into the hands of Fr Mario Aquistapace, who had been twenty seven years in China, director of the *Orfanato Salesiano da Immaculada Conceicao* in Macau for ten years, before transferring to Peking where he was founder and director of the school. Johnny's perpetual profession was witnessed by Fr Bernard (Barney) Tohill from Belfast, himself a missionary in Hong Kong, and Fr John Clifford, his rector in St Louis, West Point, HK. The comments say his health was good, he was a good teacher and assistant, and very well liked by the older boys (*assai ben voluto dai ragazzi grandi*), a man of solid piety, good character and helpful, with a very good religious spirit and of sound morality.

TOWARDS SALESIAN PRIESTHOOD

Johnny returned to England, to Melchet Court (Romsey, Hants), in the Marian Year of 1954 to begin his theological studies and took under his wing Chan Sing-ka and Mark Wong to further their studies there. He also looked after Winston Chu who went to England at about the same time. Both Winston and Mark became his lifelong friends and paid tribute to him for what he had done for them.

He was ordained a Salesian priest in Melchet Court on 13 July 1958 by Bishop Joseph Rudderham of Clifton, and returned to Hong Kong immediately, living the following fifteen years there. Besides teaching English and History at school certificate level, he was rector and principal of St Louis School, one of the biggest secondary schools in the territory, and he left a rich heritage of care for the education of all his pupils who maintained a deep love and devotion to him for what he had done for them, in particular his developing and supporting the Past Pupils Union which thrived in Hong Kong, introducing a matriculation evening school, as well as being the force and spirit that formed the past pupils union in Canada and Australia in the 1990s. One past pupil David Yang built and named a school in China in his honour!



Síniú an tSealbhóra.
Signature of Bearer.
Signature du Titulaire.

John Foster

Results for Passenger Lists Leaving UK 1890-1960

Your search criteria

John
First name(s)
Foster
Last name
1927
Birth year
1949
Departure year
Southampton
Departure port
Hong Kong
Destination port
China
Destination country
Carthage
Ship name

1 result(s)

First name(s)	Last name	Birth year	Departure port	Departure year	Destination port	Destination country
John	Foster	1928	Southampton	1949	Hong Kong	China

1

Missionary Days in Hong Kong: (from top left) Provincials Frs Charles Braga and Mario Aquistapace; Fr John Foster's passport photo and SS Carthage 1949 Passenger List.

Anthony O wrote: "Most St Louis old boys who know Fr John Foster respect him for his foresight and pragmatism in transforming St Louis into a highly reputable secondary school during his time as Prefect of Studies and Rector, and for his caring for old boys in forming SLOBA [St Louis Old Boys Association] Hong Kong, Canada, and Australia. The class of 1956 however had the pleasure of knowing the young Brother Johnny arriving in Hong Kong in 1949 from Dublin, Ireland to begin his teaching and preaching duties, and embraced him as an easy going brotherly, rather than a reverend fatherly figure."

Johnny spent weekends offering service to American servicemen on rest and recreation. In 1969-70 he was a member of the Senate of Priests HK. He was superior of Tang King Po College HK, Chairman HK Association of Careers Masters and Chairman of HK Catholic Education Council as well as a member of the Certificate of Education Board.

BACK TO HIS ROOTS

He returned to Ireland in 1972 for health reasons and was vice rector in the Salesian house of studies in Maynooth before being appointed along with this writer one of the first two Salesian curates in St Agnes's parish, Crumlin, Dublin in 1975 where he became

affectionately known as “Hong Kong Johnny” as he spoke so often of his time in HK. From his time as a deacon, Fr Alan Mowles, founder of Brú Crumlin was the first Salesian working fulltime in the parish as a parish chaplain and eventually as curate.

In September 1990 Johnny was appointed to Salesian Agricultural and Horticultural college in Warrenstown as rector and principal of the agricultural college, a time when he delighted in wielding power and on one occasion, when questioned by a confrere as to whom he had consulted before making some changes around the place, responded emphatically, “I don’t consult, I *tell them what to do* !”

He returned in 1996 to Crumlin as rector of Salesian House and as a curate in St Agnes’s. He was particularly happy in his role as chaplain and chairman of St Damian’s School in Perrystown, whose principals were Mr and Mrs Leahy, parents of Brendan present Bishop of Limerick, whose episcopal ordination Johnny proudly attended and at which he had the great pleasure of meeting the Archbishop of Dublin Diamuid Martin for whom he always bore a deep affection. He remained active in the parish until the summer of 2014 by which time his mobility and lucidity had waned considerably.

THE SLOW DECLINE

Johnny kept his links wherever he went, England, New Zealand, Canada, Australia – be it with family or with the broader Salesian Family, particularly with the Past Pupils of St Louis Hong Kong.

In his retirement dementia developed, though the *Legion of Mary* members were happy to continue to avail of his services, to which he attended dutifully each week.

Over the weeks and months, he slipped into a middle distance world of his own, failing to recognise some people at times. He once asked Salesian Fr Michelín Connell – a distance relative and working in South Africa – how Michelín was as he hadn’t seen him for a good while! Michelín told Johnny that he’d tell Michelín he was asking for him when he saw him! The same happened several months later when he failed to recognise his rector and asked in his thoughtful way, “and how’s Pat Egan doing?”!

As the dementia increased, he attended the Lorcan O’Toole Day Care Centre which he helped onto a firm footing in its early years. He looked forward to the company it provided and joined in the Bingo and some of the activities but had no time for what he called ‘the women’s exercises’.

At his reposing in the McElroy funeral home in Crumlin Village, a parishioner shared her experience of Johnny around the time of her husband’s death. Johnny was visiting her road, as was his custom, and dropped in to see how she was managing. He noticed her car had a flat tyre and mentioned it to her, took off his jacket, asked her for the keys of the car and changed the tyre himself. He took the cup of tea she offered him, and commented when she invited him to drop in any time he was passing, that it wouldn’t be a good thing for a priest to be seen dropping in too often on a recently bereaved widow!

As his remains were brought in and out of St Agnes's Church before and after the Requiem Mass, pupils from two classes in St Damian's school formed a guard of honour of which Johnny himself would have been immensely proud.

He will be sadly missed by his family, confreres, friends and a very wide circle of Past Pupils from his beloved Hong Kong and the members of the Ballykelly Gaelic Football Club, Monasterevan, of which he was life-long President, and who formed a guard of honour when the hearse arrived at the edge of Monasterevan and walked alongside his coffin on the last mile to his final resting place with his parents in St Evin's New Cemetery, Monasterevin.

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam uasal!

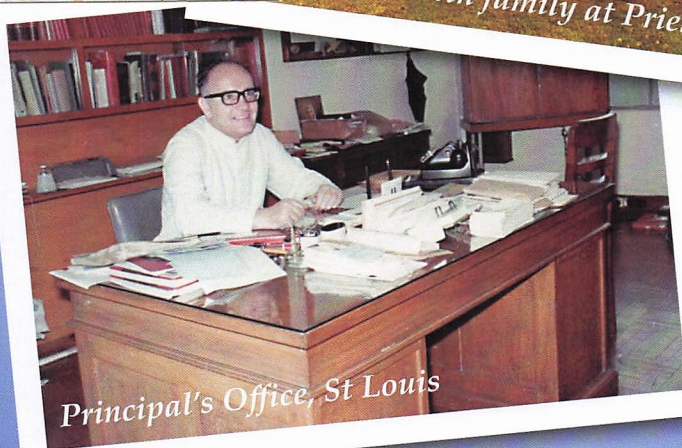
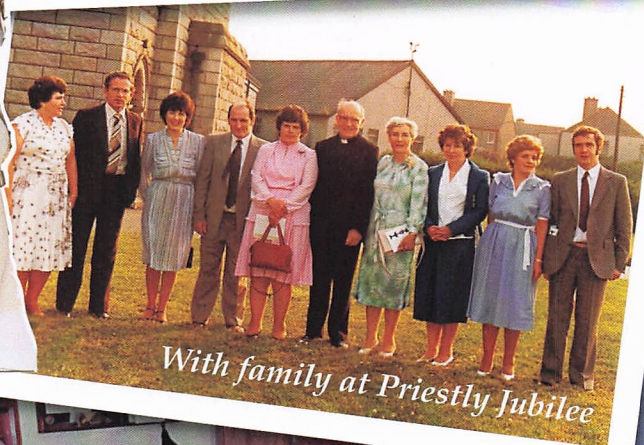
May his noble soul find its place at God's right hand!

Fr Pat Egan SDB, *Rector*.
Salesian House, St Teresa's Road, Crumlin, Dublin 12.

Data for the Necrology:

10 March

P FOSTER John - † Naas, Ireland, 2017, a. 89



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