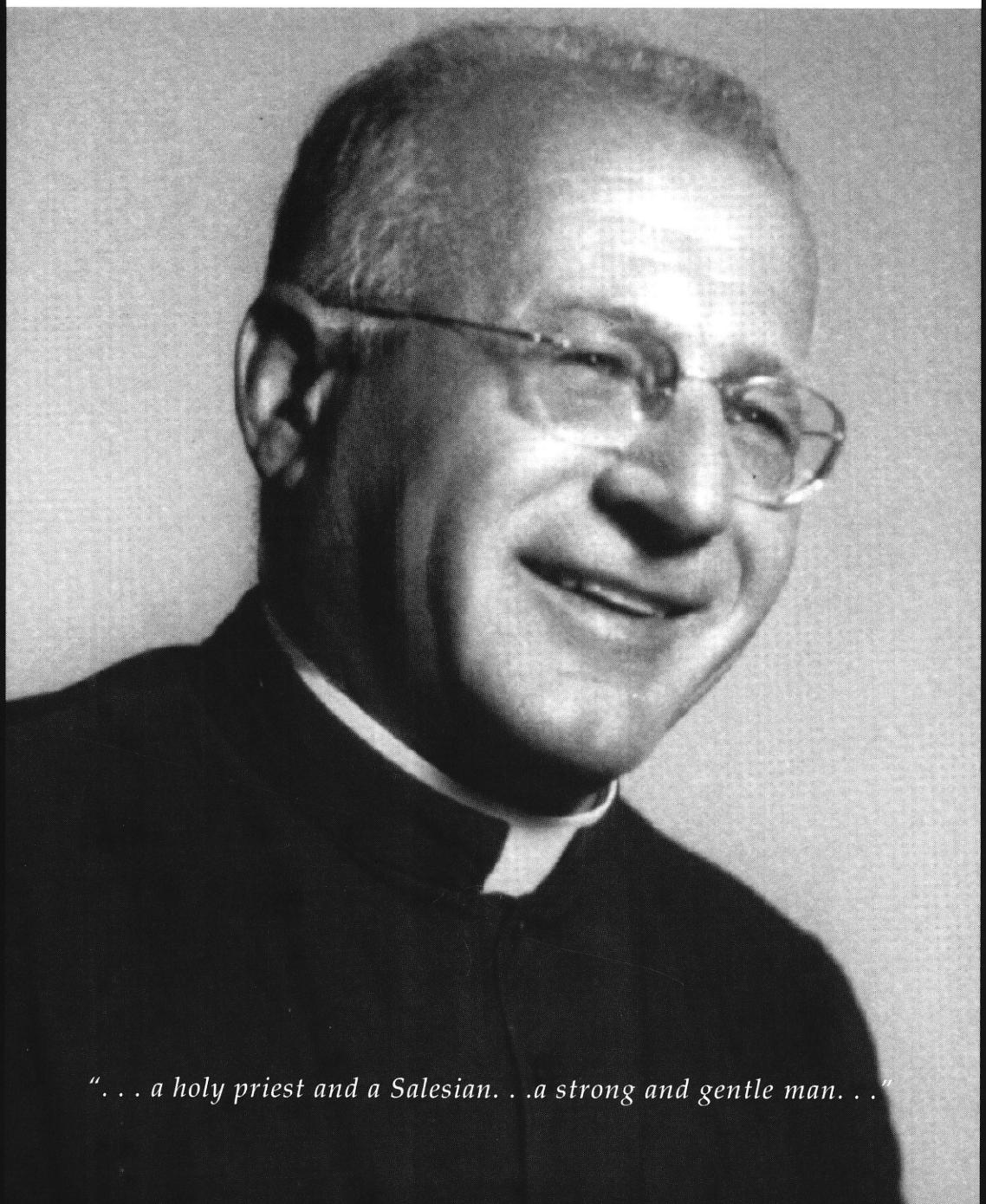




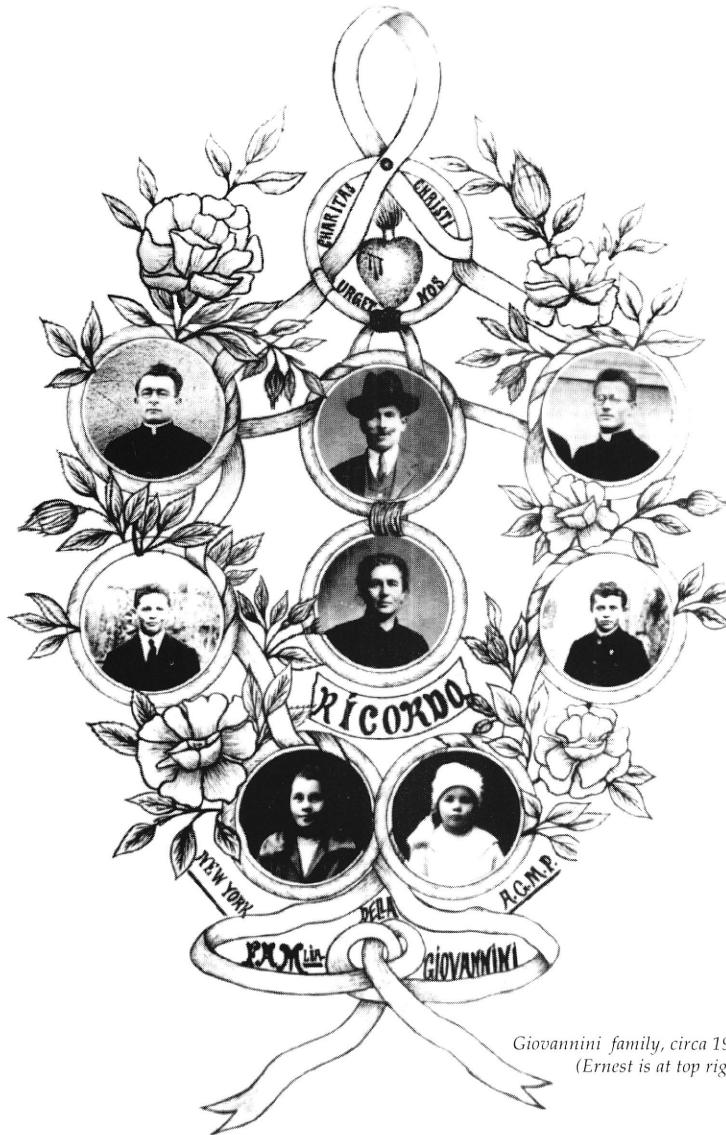
# Father Ernest Giovannini, S.D.B.

*Born July 24, 1904 • Ordained February 2, 1931 • Died March 14, 1993*



*"... a holy priest and a Salesian. . . a strong and gentle man. . ."*





*Giovannini family, circa 1924  
(Ernest is at top right)*

## Father Ernest Giovannini, S.D.B.

Our beloved elder confrere, a holy priest and a Salesian to the core, a strong and gentle man, Father Ernest Dominic Giovannini left us peacefully on March 14, 1993. He died after a brief but painful illness, in Watsonville, California (USA), where he had lived since 1972.

A number of confreres who had the good fortune to know Father Giovannini, and even

to work closely with him, have sent in touching testimonies in appreciation. Among the many received, one comes from Father Bernard Tohill, who served with Father Giovannini as Regional Councilor, and was closely associated with him in Turin from 1965 to 1971. He writes:

"When I think of him, several lines of Shakespeare come to mind: ' . . . This was a man!' 'He was a man, take him for all in all. I

shall not look upon his like again,' and even the words of Qoheleth: 'One man among a thousand have I found'."<sup>1</sup>

Remarkably, this very feeling was the shared consensus of the many confreres and friends who attended the funeral Mass and the Christian burial service, in Richmond, on March 23: "What a beautiful man! What a genuine man! What a strong and gentle man!" These were the spontaneous assessments most frequently heard.

### His Early Years

Father Giovannini was born on July 21, 1904, in the village of Casabianca, municipal town of Verolengo, province of Turin, diocese of Ivrea, Italy, the second of six children --- four boys and two girls --- to gladden the fruitful marriage of Giuseppe Defendente Giovannini and Rosa Vaschetto. He was baptized Ernest Dominic on July 24, 1904, in the parish church of San Grato in Casabianca. The pastor, Father Luigi Giovannini, a relative, administered the sacrament.

Ernest Dominic grew up in an extended family, under the watchful eye of a strong but loving Christian mother, of a gentle father, and of several other caring adults, with the benefit of the close companionship and friendly rivalry of siblings and of numerous cousins. He seems to have been especially close to his younger sister, Maria, who survives him. Thoughtfulness, trust, reserve, poise, self-reliance, tenacity, courage, resourcefulness, an eagerness for work—these were the character traits of the Giovannini children, of Ernest in particular. The country setting, work in the fields, contact with both the harshness and beauty of nature, a comfortable, yet unsophisticated home life, were the source of that

simplicity and rough-hewn genuineness which endeared Father Giovannini to all those who later came to know him. These circumstances were also responsible for awakening in the young boy that awareness of God's presence and that filial piety which were later such evident marks of Father Giovannini's spirituality.



His "Salesian Family" portrait, 1922

The Giovannini and Vaschetto families had in the past nurtured vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. The Giovannini family in particular had strong Salesian connections. One of Ernest's uncles, Giuseppe, was a Salesian priest, and another uncle, Ambrogio, a Salesian brother. A close older relative, one of Ernest's best friends, Tommaso Giovannini, was likewise a Salesian priest. With

such examples before them, Ernest, his elder brother Joseph, and his younger brother Attilio all would opt for the priestly vocation in the Salesian Society. The three would eventually come to the United States—Joseph as a seminarian, two years before Ernest; Attilio, as a priest and director of novices, much later.

It appears that Ernest's initial vocational decision was made around the time of his Confirmation at the hands of Bishop Matthew Filippello of Ivrea, on September 2, 1917. By this date young Ernest was ready to begin his secondary studies. Thus it came about that on October 1, 1918 he was enrolled in the Salesian school of Valdocco in Turin. His brother Joseph had gone there before him, and was by then a Salesian seminarian.

This had all taken place while the First World War was raging. Mr. Giovannini, in military service from 1915 to 1918, returned to find that the family had weathered the storm, and that Ernest had become a boarder at the Salesian Oratory.<sup>2</sup>

Being at the Oratory made a great deal of difference to both Ernest's spiritual life and his eventual option for the Salesian life. For here he came under the influence of such great Salesians as Father Paul Albera, and Blessed Philip Rinaldi, especially the latter.

Father Albera had been Rector Major since 1911, and one of his chief concerns was to strengthen the spiritual life of the Salesians. His circular letters, taken together, constitute a monumental exposition of Salesian spirituality. As a consequence, Valdocco was experiencing a veritable spiritual renewal. Father Rinaldi made a notable contribution—for he was active not only in matters pertaining to his office, but also in the exercise of the priestly ministry, in hearing confessions, and in the spiritual direction of the various communities of both the Salesians and the Salesian Sisters. During the last year of high school, Ernest came under his influence, if not under his immediate direction.

But more concretely, the determining influence came from Father John Setaro.<sup>3</sup> As Father Giovannini recalled on the occasion of his diamond jubilee, this worthy American Salesian, at the time stationed at Valdocco,

befriended young Ernest, followed him, and supported him in his decision to become a Salesian. In 1922 Ernest asked to be admitted to the Salesian novitiate, and received the clerical habit from the newly elected Rector Major, Father Rinaldi, in the Basilica of Our Lady Help of Christians, on July 22.

Father Rinaldi, ably assisted by Father Peter Ricaldone, set about restarting and expanding the Salesian work, which had come to a near standstill during the First World War and its immediate aftermath. The missions were then experiencing a resurgence throughout the Church, and new fields were opening for the Salesian Society in South America, in India, the Far East, and Australia.

Provincials from countries outside of Europe who attended General Chapter XII in 1922 had begun successfully to "recruit" aspirants and young Salesian seminarians at the Oratory and elsewhere, in order to strengthen the personnel base in their own countries. It was under these circumstances that Father Emmanuel Manassero, who had succeeded Father Ernest Coppo as Provincial of the United States Province in 1919, "recruited" Ernest Giovannini, then eighteen years of age, and eight other prospective novices.

The group sailed for the United States on the ocean liner Paris, and arrived in New Rochelle, New York, Provincial residence and house of formation, on October 22, 1922. Among them was also Father Alfred Broccardo, who remains the senior Salesian confrere in the San Francisco Province.

### **Toward the Salesian Priesthood: at New Rochelle**

Ernest's first three years in the United States were spent in New Rochelle. Because of the group's late arrival, the novitiate was not held in the year 1922-23. Consequently, the prospective novices began their philosophical course, while studying English intensively.

The novitiate started on August 4, 1923, under the guidance of the then director of novices, Father Francis Binelli; and Ernest made his first profession on August 24, 1924.<sup>4</sup> Father Binelli, who had been director of novices in

France, Italy, and Austria, before being appointed to New Rochelle in 1921, had a profound influence on Ernest. Later Father Giovannini would speak of him with both reverence and affection. Father Binelli was a spiritual descendant of Father Albera, under whom he had served in France. His personal holiness and his genuine Salesian spirituality were matched by an unswerving fidelity to Salesian tradition. He possessed, as Father Giovannini averred, "Don Bosco's heart and spirit." Father Giovannini could have been speaking of himself.

### Learning, Teaching in Watsonville

By the summer of 1925, Ernest had completed his abbreviated college and philosophy course, and was ready for practical Salesian work. His assignment was to Saint Francis School in Watsonville, California, then in its fourth year of operation under Salesian auspices.

Father Giovannini recalled that the "expeditionary force" making its way to California by train under the leadership of Father Alfred Pauc consisted of two other young Salesians besides himself, Alfred Broccardo and Brother Stanislas Jaruzel. He joked about the single dollar which Father Pauc doled out each morning for the day's "provender."<sup>5</sup>

Ernest spent five hard but fruitful years at Saint Francis (orphanage, juvenile hall, and general primary school combined): the first two in practical training and teaching, and the next three in teaching and in the study of theology.

The Watsonville years were a period of Salesian and spiritual growth for Ernest. Faithful to prayer and the commitments of community life, Ernest was also totally dedicated to his young charges. He loved them and sacrificed himself for them. He took charge of the more difficult boys and of resettling occasional runaways. It was his particular task to organize various activities, such as recreations, outings, and camping days. This

he did with the help of his close friend and companion, Alfred Broccardo, of the younger seminarians, Gabriel Zavattaro and Louis Masoero, and of Brother Stanislas Jaruzel. Through the experience of Saint Francis School, Ernest acquired that frank, yet gentle way of dealing with boys which became the typical "Giovannini style."

Not an uncommon occurrence in those years, Ernest studied his theological treatises while engaged full-time in teaching, assisting, and caring for the boys. The light in his cell burned late into the night; and he would be up at the crack of dawn with his books, devoting hours to study before the bell rang for rising. It was like the old "school of fire."<sup>6</sup> In February and May 1930 Ernest received the minor orders; and on October 4 of the same year he was ordained deacon.

### Ordination at SS. Peter and Paul

Meanwhile the Salesian work in California had experienced considerable development since first being established in San Francisco in

1896. This warranted the creation of a separate province, under the patronage of St. Andrew the Apostle, by decree of May 28, 1926; and its first provincial was Father Orestes Trinchieri.

Saints Peter and Paul in San Francisco was Deacon Giovannini's new assignment in October 1930. There, while teaching in the school, which had by now been upgraded to secondary level, and working in both church and club, he completed the study of his theological treatises. He was ordained a priest on February 2, 1931 by Archbishop Edward J. Hanna. The *Don Bosco Messenger*, March 1931, reported:

"The Feast of the Presentation was fittingly observed at SS. Peter and Paul Church (San Francisco), when on Monday, February 2, at eight o'clock, the Rev. Ernest Giovannini, S.C., the Rev. Mario Covacich, S.C., and the



Watsonville, 1928

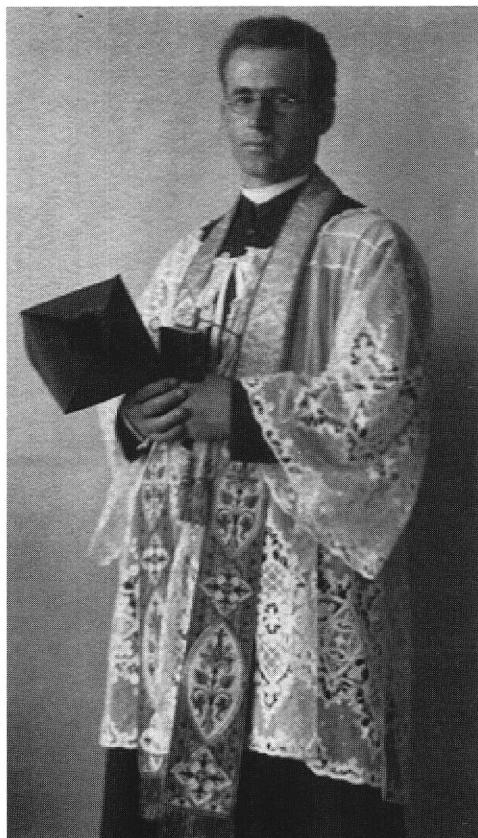
Rev. Alfred Broccardo, S.C., were elevated to the Holy Priesthood. The ordination ceremony was performed by His Excellency, the Most Rev. Edward J. Hanna, D.D., Archbishop of San Francisco . . .

"The Rev. Father Giovannini, S.C., and the Rev. Father Covacich, S.C., said their first public Masses at the Church of SS. Peter and Paul, San Francisco, on Sunday, February 8th; . . . the Rev. Father Broccardo, S.C., on the same day, at the Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Valley Church), Watsonville, California. . . ."

Father Covacich celebrated the high Mass. Father Giovannini was "no singer," but his first Mass at eight o'clock was a solemn one nonetheless. The church resounded with festive choral music accompanied by the pipe organ, under the musical direction of Father Bartholomew Pellegrino.

Father Giovannini's souvenir card distributed, as customary, on that occasion bears only two laconic quotes: "I am needy and poor; O God, help me" [Ps 70:6]; and "This my joy therefore is fulfilled" [Jn 3:29]. But his feelings are given fuller expression in a prayer type-written presumably for that occasion:

*LORD JESUS CHRIST, grant me the grace of perseverance in my vocation and to the vows that I have made. Help me to remain as poor, chaste, and obedient as you were, that I may continue to serve you in humility and love. Grant me the grace to remain faithful to the teachings of your Church, and to the spirit of Blessed John Bosco, that I may be your witness to all the people you call me to serve. Give me the courage to rise above all pettiness and the honesty to know myself—that I may know you better and do your will. Take me, Lord, and teach me patience in trials, resignation in weariness, and joy in my work. Show me the wisdom of humility, the delight of union with you, and the joy of being taken up in working for God. Mary Help of Christians, pray for me.*



Ordination, SS. Peter and Paul Church, February 2, 1931

*Blessed John Bosco, pray for me.  
Amen.*

Father Giovannini continued his work at Saints Peter and Paul's through the year following his ordination. In autumn 1932 he was assigned to the parish of Mary Help of Christians in Oakland as associate to Father Anthony Ragogna, while holding the same teaching post at the school of Saints Peter and Paul, and regularly commuting to San Francisco.

### **At Richmond: Growing to His Task**

Father Giovannini had been in this ministry of parish work and teaching for just one year, when Father Trinchieri called him to the house of formation in Richmond, California. It had been one of the Provincial's priorities to develop a local formation program. He had acquired the property at Richmond, with its

large mansion, and additional buildings, for this very purpose. The Sacred Heart Novitiate had been canonically erected there in 1927, and a philosophical studentate established. For practical reasons, these formation programs were soon transferred to Newton, New Jersey. But the junior seminary program begun at the same time was retained and experienced steady growth.

In autumn 1933, Father Giovannini joined a staff of ten Salesians, as catechist and prefect of studies, with Father Robert Wieczorek as director. The following year he was appointed prefect-treasurer. Meanwhile, Father Ambrose Rossi, who had been appointed Provincial of the New Rochelle Province the previous year, in 1934 took on the leadership of the San Francisco Province as well. In 1935, he appointed Father Giovannini to succeed Father Wieczorek as Director—a post he held until 1940.

The Richmond property had been a family farm; and the buildings on the property, including the mansion, had been designed accordingly. It took knowledge, skill, and a lot of energy to bring the premises and the land in line with the school and formation program. But it was done, and each one made a contribution. Father Armand Oliveri recalls: "Developing the property, planting trees and flowers, building the outdoor Lourdes' grotto and Stations of the Cross and, feeding us in those years of the depression, was a demanding job. Father Giovannini expected us to work hard, and he set the example."

In his concern for the aspirants' summer activities, Father Giovannini also established a camp in the high Sierras, near Oroville, on a tract of undeveloped land which had been donated to the Salesians.

Father Giovannini acted to meet all of the boys' youthful needs. But obviously his priority had to be the instruction and formation of the aspirants, to turn out knowledgeable and dedicated young Salesians for the work that lay ahead in the Province.

Here he was at his best. For, in spite of his almost shy reserve, he possessed the rare natural gift of being able to relate to young people, to draw them, and to inspire them. He had been popular and successful both in Watsonville and San Francisco. Those qualities were now brought to bear on a receptive community of fine lads and devoted confreres, with tremendous results. He is described as a "man of incredible activity." But along with this drive went a friendly, fatherly, non-threatening style that succeeded in drawing the community together as a family for common purposes. He was a man of few words. But many words were not needed, because his presence and his manner were such that confreres and boys understood *him* directly. There was never any doubt in their mind that he lived and worked for them.

"He was an ideal director for us: fatherly, kind, cheerful, yet always expecting us to put out our best," Father Oliveri adds. "He took us on many outings driving us in an open truck. He enjoyed being with us on those occasions, driving, cooking, and doing whatever needed to be done. . . .

"His unfailing kindness coupled with firmness gave us reassurance and support. . . . He was the most influential person as far as my Salesian formation is concerned, and I shall always admire him."

"My very first recollection is of him driving a tractor," recalls Father John Malloy, ". . . and dredging sand from the creek bed. The tractor tipped over, and he jumped off laughing. . . . 'Richmond' was self-contained in those days. We had a farm with ducks, chickens, and pigs; an orchard with pears, cherries, and some apples. We canned and stored fruit, tomatoes and potatoes for winter. . . . Everything was handled by the Salesians, the boys, and volunteers. As Director and Prefect, Father Ernest had much to do just putting food on the table. Those were depression years."

"Everyone loved Father Giovannini, lay



Naples, 1931

people in the area, aspirants, and confreres. The years I spent with him remain among the happiest of my life. . . . His care for me when I was sick, staying up half the night, endeared him to me more than I can say. . . . I considered him a second father and told him so before he passed away."

The yearly feast of the Director, an expression of gratitude to the man as well as to the office, was a celebration that left indelible memories in the minds and hearts of those who "were there." The school band, such as it was, would rouse the good Director with its cacophonous *mañanitas* at five o'clock in the morning. And this "musical joke" was only the beginning of a madcap celebration that would have tried the patience of Job himself. But Fr. Giovannini took these youthful tributes in stride.<sup>7</sup>

### **Breaking New Ground at Bellflower**

With Father Rossi's appointment as Provincial of both Provinces in the United States, the Salesian work underwent considerable reorganization (or, in today's "Salesianese," *ridimensionamento*). In the San Francisco Province a significant step was taken in that direction with the new school in Bellflower, California. Built on a large tract of farm land, among citrus groves, under the supervision of Father Joseph Castagnotto, it opened its doors to upper primary school boys, both boarders and day students, in autumn 1940, with Father Giovannini as Director.

The building was up and functioning, but everything else needed to be developed or brought under control. Father Giovannini went to work, and the confreres followed his example.

The late Father Larry Byrne wrote in his chronicle: "He would don a pair of coveralls and, at the wheel of a truck or tractor, tackle the hardest kind of work that farm or school property required,

"One day the bishop called and asked to see the Director of the school. Father Giovannini was summoned from the barn where he was working. He came in and, unrecognizable in his coveralls as he was, walked right past the bishop up to his room to wash and change into

his clerical garb. He then returned to greet the distinguished visitor. The bishop had no idea that the 'hired hand' who had just passed him was none other than the Director."

With the cooperation of many people, confreres and dedicated friends above all, in the three short years of his directorate, Father Giovannini succeeded in changing the physical face of the place. And, as he had done in Richmond, he acquired and developed a vacation spot in the wild San Bernardino Mountains, the "camp" at Arrowbear Lake. This provided the confreres with a change of scene, while they continued their work for boys also during the summer.

Those were war years, and the swarms of airplanes lifting off on a daily basis from the aircraft factories around the school reminded everyone of that harsh reality. Even though the great depression was receding, those were nonetheless years of hardship. Father Giovannini kept the school going in spite of the very small tuition charged. He had already enlisted the help of a good group of friends and benefactors; but he himself went looking for help. He never failed to fill his pickup truck whenever he went out. And before long, he had acquired a reputation of "lifting" anything that wasn't nailed down.

Again, as he had done in Richmond, so also in Bellflower, with the help of able and dedicated confreres (such as Fathers George Hacker, Prefect of Studies, and John Dalmaso, Catechist) Father Giovannini succeeded in establishing a good school program and the true Salesian tradition in education. The present writer was fortunate enough to serve as teacher and assistant during the last few months of Father Giovannini's rectorate, in 1943, and can testify to his ability to inspire and to elicit every one's contribution—in fact to call forth at times the most generous response on the part of the young Salesians under his care.

He would frequently talk to the confreres and comment on the Salesian Constitutions and the Salesian traditions. But he would also take a personal interest in each confrere, especially the young Salesians who experienced beginners' difficulties.

This writer, who was one of them at the



*Richmond, circa 1932*

time, still recalls his fatherly concern, his teaching, and his words of encouragement.

Likewise, as in Richmond he had inspired many aspirants to opt for the Salesian life, so also in Bellflower he succeeded in enlisting numbers of vocations to the Salesian life, both from the boarding and from the day-student sections of the school, the fruit of the Salesian educational method.

### **As Provincial of New Rochelle Province**

During the war years (1941-44), further changes took place in both the New Rochelle and the San Francisco Province. In 1941, Father Eneas Tozzi, who had come to the United States as Extraordinary Visitor and Delegate of the Rector Major for North America for the duration of the war, succeeded Father Rossi as Provincial. In 1942 Father Alvin Fedrigotti was appointed provincial of San Francisco Province.

In January 1944, Father Giovannini was appointed Vice-Provincial of the New Rochelle Province, and in May of the same year, Provincial, replacing Father Tozzi.

Father Giovannini accepted the challenge. The task of governing the Province was taxing enough, but his goal was also that of expanding the Salesian work. In either case, the Giovannini style never changed: patience, perseverance, courage, immense energy and drive, firmness, gentleness, great respect for persons, the friendly approach. He maintained a personal relationship with each confrere, making every effort to share their life, troubles, and joys. He loved to "get together" with confreres and boys when

visiting the communities.

The Provincial's feast, celebrated at Newton on each of the fourteen years of his tenure, was a joyful occasion—a true family celebration, with music, outdoor cooking, and stories. Invariably on

such occasions he would announce some new Salesian work.

Indeed, his appointment signaled a great revival of Salesian work in the New Rochelle Province. The list is impressive: Saint Dominic Savio High School, East Boston (MA) in 1945; Don Bosco Juniorate, West Haverstraw (NY) in 1947; Don Bosco Agricultural School, Huttonsville (WV) in 1947; Saint John Bosco School, Jacquet River (NB, Canada) in 1947; Salesian Boys' Club, East Boston (MA) in 1948; Don Bosco Technical High School, Paterson (NJ) in 1948; Saint Rosalie Parish, Harvey (LA) in 1949; Saint Dominic Savio School, Saint Louis de Kent (NB, Canada) in 1950; Camp Don Bosco, East Barrington (NH) in 1952; Sacred Heart Juniorate, Ipswich (MA) in 1955; Don Bosco Technical High School, Boston (MA) in 1955; Holy Rosary Parish, Birmingham (AL) in 1955; Saint Patrick School, Sherbrooke (PQ, Canada); Saint Dominic Savio Juniorate, Cedar Lake (IN) in 1956; a new novitiate residence, Newton (NJ) in 1958.<sup>8</sup>

Father August Bosio adds: "And who can estimate the good done by the Dominic Savio Clubs . . . by the Mission Office, by the Don Bosco Multimedia . . . by the annual province-wide catechism contests and stage competitions, and by the summer camps—all initiatives that saw their beginning during the Giovannini era?"<sup>9</sup>

A letter by Father Giovannini referring to the East Boston foundation reveals an aspect of the Giovannini style: "Well, now Boston has become a reality. We are now dealing to buy a public school building, a very good one . . . The

Archbishop ... bought five such buildings for his parochial schools. . . I have not announced the price to the confreres, because they may think we are buying a shack . . . We get it for \$2,500! . . . For this year we will send someone there to prepare the place and to do a little Salesian oratory work; next year we will start with two classes and a few shops, and add to it every year . . . We are not prepared to make a big splash all at once.”<sup>10</sup>

The late Fr. John Faita wrote: “I was very close to Father Giovannini. . . . He was one of the greatest Salesians I ever knew. . . . In 1947 Father Giovannini asked me to go to New Brunswick, Canada, with Fr. Albert Thys, and start the work in Jacquet River. . . . My French was negligible, and I happened to be in the process of obtaining naturalization in the United States. So I pleaded with him. He merely replied: “It will only be for a short time, John, until Father Pierre Decarie can come and take your place. . . . Do your best, and God will do the rest.” We went to work. With the help of some of the children and their parents, we turned the parish hall into a school, . . . and Don Bosco was established in Canada! Forty-six years have gone by, and here am I, still in Canada. . . !”

On Father Giovannini’s style Father Bosio again writes: “The New Rochelle Province has been blessed with his presence for fourteen years; and the legacy he left is the spirit of ‘Salesian fatherliness.’ He never lost his human touch. He’d rather wear an apron for a barbecue than discourse on the Salesian spirit in formal robes. He lived among us ‘as one who serves.’ He had respect for persons...to see him was to love him.”<sup>11</sup>

### **General Councilor for Vocational Schools and The Brothers’ Formation**

Father Giovannini, either as Provincial or as General Councilor, attended General Chapters



Newton, 1952

XVI (1947), XVII (1952); XVIII (1958), XIX (1965), and XX (1971-2) of the Salesian Society.

General Chapter XVII (July-August 1952) elected Father Renato Ziggotti to succeed Father Ricaldone as Rector Major. World travel having been greatly facilitated by jet aircraft, Father Ziggotti undertook to visit all the houses of the Congregation between 1952 and 1957. From November 1954 to July 1955, in the wake of Dominic Savio’s canonization, he undertook the longest of his journeys, visiting sixteen countries, including the United States. His report in shows that he was definitely impressed with the progress of the Salesian work in the United States and Canada, and with Father Giovannini’s activities in particular.<sup>12</sup>

General Chapter XVII addressed the problems faced by Salesian vocational schools (both trade and agricultural)<sup>13</sup> and definitively approved the general regulations for the houses of formation. General Chapter XVIII discussed, among other things, the implementation of the Apostolic Constitution *Sedes Sapientiae* as it related to studies and formation of Salesians. It is in this setting that Father Giovannini, on July 28, 1958, was elected General Councilor in charge of vocational schools and returned to Turin.

He thus became part of the team which, in the context of Vatican II and under the leadership of Father Ziggotti, and subsequently of Father Louis Ricceri, was responsible for bringing the Congregation into modern times.

In the fifties and ‘sixties, Salesian vocational schools throughout the world quantitatively (that is, in terms of the number

of pupils enrolled and of personnel involved in their operation) surpassed all other kinds of Salesian work. Likewise, the number of requests for new vocational schools received by the Rector Major from both religious and civil authorities surpassed requests received for any other type of Salesian activity.

At the same time, revolutionary transformations had taken place since the Second World War in the field of work—specifically: huge technical advances in a dozen different industrial fields, and the rise of completely new industries; new machinery; new techniques; incipient computerization and automation; new types of organization in work and production; disappearance of certain trades and professions, and rise of new ones; pervasive social transformations and new legislation pertaining to work.

Such transformations required a thorough-going review of what was being done in Salesian vocational schools, the chief purpose of which, after all, was to prepare skilled and responsible Christian workers. The immediate need was to upgrade the programs and to expand the theoretical formation of the personnel, especially of the Salesian brothers.

But beyond such adjustments, the transformations in progress everywhere seemed to require some fresh and imaginative thinking, followed by some hard decisions dealing with both vocational school reorganization and formation of personnel.

Father Giovannini went to work patiently and methodically on these urgent and complex issues. To start with, he appointed a number of committees and subcommittees to study every aspect of the problem, and to draft reports and proposals. At the same time, in order to acquaint as many as possible with the data obtained, to raise consciousness among the confreres, and to allow input on a broader basis, he organized numerous conventions and workshops, and sponsored the publication of reports and monographs.

He then moved to develop resources for



Turin, circa 1960

teaching and technical training. To this end he established the Central Technical Bureau and staffed it with appropriate personnel. He also promoted collaboration with various organizations and enlisted the help of professionals active in this field of education. He sought the technical assistance of executives of a number of important industries and of departments of the Italian government. The publication of the *Graphic Arts Encyclopedia*, the founding of the Higher School of Graphic Arts at Turin's Polytechnic Institute, and the establishment at Valdocco of the School of Applied Photography resulted from such collaboration.

No one pretends that he succeeded in "disposing" of the problems. What he did was to create an awareness and set afoot a movement that is still gaining momentum today. And even though in his brief tenure of seven years the results achieved pertained concretely to the situation in Italy, and affected immediately a relatively small number of institutions and people, the movement in its ideal thrust had much larger repercussions. It affected, by adaptation and imitation, the reorganization of Salesian vocational schools and of personnel formation throughout the world.

A better formation and a more systematic professional education of the Salesian brothers, at the various levels and on an on-going basis, were one Father Giovannini's priorities. To this end, he reorganized the proficiency course (magistero) for brothers, seeking legal recognition for it; he encouraged brothers to obtain

university degrees in their professional fields; he instituted summer courses for brothers in social studies, catechetics, and other subjects. He was particularly sensitive to the plight of those brothers whose trades (such as shoe-making and tailoring) were being phased out in our vocational schools. He encouraged them to move into new professional fields, and provided them with the opportunity to do so.

It was Father Giovannini's merit that all such matters were brought to the attention of the whole Congregation at General Chapters, especially at General Chapter XIX (April-June, 1965). This Chapter, which elected Father Louis Ricceri and which made a first revision of the Constitutions and Regulations, also reached a number of milestone decisions. Among them were those relating to the formation of the Salesian brother. Thus Father Giovannini's endeavors in this field over the years came to benefit the whole Congregation.<sup>14</sup>

Relating to Father Giovannini's activity as General Councilor, we have a number of touching recent testimonies from Salesian priests and brothers close to him:

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"I knew Fr. Giovannini in my capacity as administrator in a vocational school, and lived at his side as his secretary in 1966-67. He was always genuinely kind and fatherly.... He was much more interested in encouraging, and giving support than in enforcing discipline. He was a gentleman who never 'lost his cool' with people, but treated everyone with courtesy and respect." --- Father Andrea Perolari, Bra, Italy.

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"A genuinely good man, religious, and priest, he showed his goodness in the simple, humble way with which he received people, an attitude that inspired trust and invited confidence. He was incapable of rigidity and coldness. He won the love and esteem of all, especially of the brothers, for whose work he showed great sensitivity and appreciation, and whose interests he upheld and promoted in all circumstances. . . . In this he was most like Father Rinaldi." --- a Salesian, Turin, Italy.

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"Fr. Giovannini was a simple and truly democratic man. While he had free first-class

privileges for all train travel in Italy, he preferred to travel in second class with his secretary or other confreres, and to share prepared sandwiches for lunch or dinner. Once, having ripped his cassock while on the train, he promptly took needle and thread out of his bag and mended the rip."--- Father Gaetano Franci, Turin, Italy.

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"I worked with Father Giovannini from 1958 to '68. Through those years we witnessed a veritable revolution in Salesian graphic arts; he was the prime mover behind it. With it went a reevaluation of the Salesian lay vocation.

"In a 1959 pamphlet entitled, *Salesian Graphic Arts*, he wrote: 'Just as Don Bosco was ahead of his time in establishing the vocational school, so was he also in the creation of the lay religious, the Salesian brother. In the brother we see the successful union of the layman, as to outward appearance and activity, and of the religious, as to consecration and spirit. ' " --- Brother Guido Bonarda, Colle Don Bosco, Italy.

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"With other Salesian brothers, I had the good fortune of being associated with Father Giovannini for several years in a professional capacity. The concern, the trust, the humanity, and the love he showed toward us was a really new experience. He expected us to live as religious first and foremost, but then he placed no restrictions on our creative imagination and on our initiative. He was a second Father Rinaldi to all of us.

"In 1961, on the centenary of the establishment of first printing shop at Valdocco, the *School of Applied Photography* was founded with the purpose of placing at the disposal of the Congregation a technically advanced photographic resource to serve the Salesian apostolate. Father Giovannini would spend hours with us, laying out the labs, soldering sinks, bending tubes. Whenever he returned from California, he never failed to visit the School and spend time with us, sharing our successes and failures."--- Brother Enzo Spiri, Turin, Italy.

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"Fr. Giovannini is particularly to be commended for his programs to retrain Salesian brothers who were 'out of a job.' They were chiefly shoemakers, tailors and wood workers

who had gone into forced early retirement from teaching and from involvement in education because those workshops had outlasted their usefulness. Father Giovannini's programs made it possible for those brothers to acquire a new profession with new hope and purpose." --- Brother Silvano Dalla Torre, Turin, Italy.

### **Traveling Regional Councilor --- for Italy, Switzerland and the Middle East**

General Chapter XIX, the [first] renewal Chapter, was held in Rome, from April 8 to June 10, 1965, on the premises of the newly built Salesian Pontifical University. This Chapter elected Father Louis Ricceri as Rector Major, when Father Zigiotti declared his intention of not standing again for reelection.

On May 3, Father Giovannini was reelected as one of the five General Councilors. (Father Bernard Tohill, provincial of the San Francisco Province, was also elected.)

The Chapter then went on to deal with a number of substantive topics leading to a restructuring of the life and work of the Society and to a thoroughgoing revision of the Constitutions. The Superior Chapter (henceforth to be called Superior Council) also underwent restructuring. Besides the Rector Major, the Prefect General, the Spiritual Director General, and the Economer General, there would be three "Consultors" (Councilors) in charge of "sections": Salesian formation, youth ministry, and adult ministry respectively. Further, there would be, on an experimental basis, six "Consultors" (Councilors) in charge of "groups of provinces." They would be elected by the General Chapter, or appointed by the Rector Major in case of a vacancy.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the office of General Councilor in charge of vocational schools was abolished, that is to say, subsumed under that of the General Councilors for "sections."

And it was thus that Fr. Giovannini, having been elected Councilor, was appointed Regional Councilor in charge of the Provinces of Italy, Switzerland, and the Middle East.

The job was new and experimental in character; it was also difficult and sensitive. Not only was all the ordinary business of the Prov-

inces in the Region to be carried on through the Regional Councilor, but it also had necessarily to be conducted in continuous collaboration with the Section Councilors in charge of formation, youth and adult ministry.

Father Giovannini tackled his new job with method, vigor, and sensitivity. He would visit methodically the various Provinces in his Region, and tarry wherever there were problems that required solutions, or confreres that needed direction and support. His friendliness, his down-to-earth style, his respect for persons, his willingness to listen, soon endeared him to all, and his visits were "desired."

Fr. Giovannini carried over into his new office the special concerns that had already been characteristic of his term as Councilor for vocational schools: his great interest in, and love for the Salesian brother. Wherever he went, he sought to strengthen the position of the brothers, to talk up the Salesian lay vocation.

More significantly, he now used his authority and his personal influence to foster programs for the training and formation of brothers.

Fr. Bernard Tohill, in the tribute already cited, writes:

"I was fortunate enough to spend the years 1965-71 with Father Giovannini in Turin. . . . We got on well together; so did so many others get on well with him, as I learned in my travels. Our work would keep us out of Turin for many months each year. It was especially in the summer that we would have occasion to be and to do things together. Without even consulting me, he would put my name down for the retreat that he would be attending. And so year after year we made our annual retreat together in various places.

"Together we would visit Salesian communities on holiday. . . . In July 1970 he and I went to Sondrio where a large group of brothers were attending a course in catechetics . . . He had a great love for the brothers and had their good very much at heart. We marveled at his simplicity . . . the great attachment the brothers showed to him.

"For me it was always a pleasure to be in his company. Father Giovannini was calm,

tranquil, serene. It was easy to converse with him, for he was simple, practical and unassuming. 'His life was gentle, and the elements so mixed in him that Nature might stand up and say to all the world, . . . 'This was a man'."

## Return to Watsonville

Special General Chapter XX which, after extensive and intensive preparation, restructured the Constitutions and the Society in accordance with the renewal movement initiated by Vatican II, was held in Rome from June 10, 1971 to January 5, 1972, under the guidance of Father Ricceri. As Regional Councilor, Father Giovannini attended the Chapter, and fully participated in its work. But before elections in December he asked the Rector Major to be released and withdrew his name from the list of candidates. He had celebrated his fortieth anniversary of priesthood earlier in 1971 and now felt the weight of his 68 years. He found his progressive loss of hearing particularly troublesome. Besides, as he confided, he wanted to step down and end his days quietly in a local community.

Once the Chapter was over, Father Giovannini quickly tidied up things for his successor, and on February 4, 1972, he took his leave. On March 10 he returned to the San Francisco Province, and on April 12 he was settled at Saint Francis School, in Watsonville.

"His whole life was characterized by genuine availability," says Father Antonio Turati, recalling the move from Italy. "And this was shown to all evidence in the ease with which he made the transition from a position of authority to humble daily service in the ranks. Only truly great people can do this with simplicity and grace."<sup>16</sup>

Father Giovannini spent the last twenty-one years of his life at Saint Francis, in Watsonville, the very place where he had first

begun to work as a Salesian. For the first few years, pressed by the Provincial, Father Harry Rasmussen, he reluctantly accepted to be "recycled" (as he would say) and serve on the Provincial Council. Otherwise, he devoted his time and activity to Saint Francis, first as Vice-Director and Financial Administrator, and then as a "simple worker."

In 1978, at the age of 74, handicapped with serious hearing loss, he asked to be relieved of administrative duties. From then on, until his death, Father Giovannini simply "worked."

The testimony is unanimous: during these last years, Father Giovannini's was an exemplary life characterized by genuine, uncompromising religious observance, prayer and work—physical work, hard manual labor.

Hard work had always been his trademark. It now became his daily occupation, his daily service to the community, his daily offering to God—as well as his joy and recreation. He worked on the premises of the school and of the Penny Club, and especially at the Saint Francis Camp and Retreat Center.

As the farm and school were being phased out in 1981, and the old buildings gradually torn down, increasingly he devoted his attention to the camp. A beautiful facility situated on a high bluff overlooking the great ocean and a fine beach, its buildings were nonetheless badly in need of restoration or replacement.

Every day Father Giovannini would leave after morning devotions, Mass and a hearty breakfast, driving his old pickup truck filled with tools and materials. He would put in a hard day's work and return in the evening for a shower, evening devotions, and supper.

The results of Father Giovannini's work may be seen and admired today: a new facility and new buildings suitable for both summer camp and retreat activities; landscaping with



Watsonville, 1991

lawns and flower borders; and trees!

Tree planting, while a needed, practical operation, was for him a symbolic activity—as was the shoring up of the limestone cliff continuously being lost to erosion. Trees and shrubs were planted along the edge and down the escarpment; boulders, planks, wire netting were set in place patiently and with no little difficulty—but with results. A favorite story among local landscapers relates to this shoring project. A nearby railway line was being dismantled, and the railroad ties were being dumped into a ravine farther down from the retreat center. Father Giovannini visited the men working on the project and argued persuasively that there was a much more handy “dumping site”—at the camp. He thus came into possession of valuable beams, which he used to shore up the cliff.

Father Giovannini’s working day was filled with prayer and devout aspirations, sometimes (as his hearing declined) louder than he intended. Father Giovannini lived in union with God. His prayer life was simple but deep, and it affected even his outward deportment.

The present writer still recalls a conversation had with him at the annual retreat the very year he returned to the Province. It concerned the Salesian practices of piety; and his comments on those articles of the older Constitutions were never forgotten.

The first three articles of the chapter on the practices of piety, he explained, were the most important, because they dealt not with practices, but with the foundations of the spiritual life of a Salesian. They dealt with mutual good example, perfect fulfillment of the duties of the Christian life, with the Sacraments of the Eucharist and of Reconciliation.

This was because, according to Don Bosco, before any practice of piety was undertaken, the Salesian had to be a moral and spiritual support to the confreres by his example, had to live as a genuine Christian, had to draw his strength from union with Christ in the Eucha-

rist, had to seek continuous conversion and grace through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and had to give evidence of his religious consecration by the way he acted, prayed, spoke and behaved.

Though delivered in the simplest words and without the least affectation, these ideas show a profound grasp of Don Bosco’s mind; They also mirror Father Giovannini’s genuine, no-nonsense spirituality, both stark in its simplicity and profound in its interiority.

In 1981, Father Giovannini, together with his friend and companion, Father Broccardo, celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of priestly ordination. It was a festive occasion for the Province. Among the many messages received, the one from the Rector Major, Father Egidio Viganò, is particularly significant. He cites Father Giovannini’s “enlightened initiatives,”

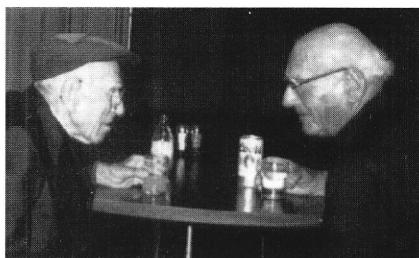
and the “marvelous progress” made by the New Rochelle Province during his fourteen years as Provincial. He commends Father Giovannini’s work to develop “our technical schools throughout the world” during his tenure as General

Councilor, stating that the Congregation “will forever be in Father Giovannini’s debt for his vision and for his guidance.”

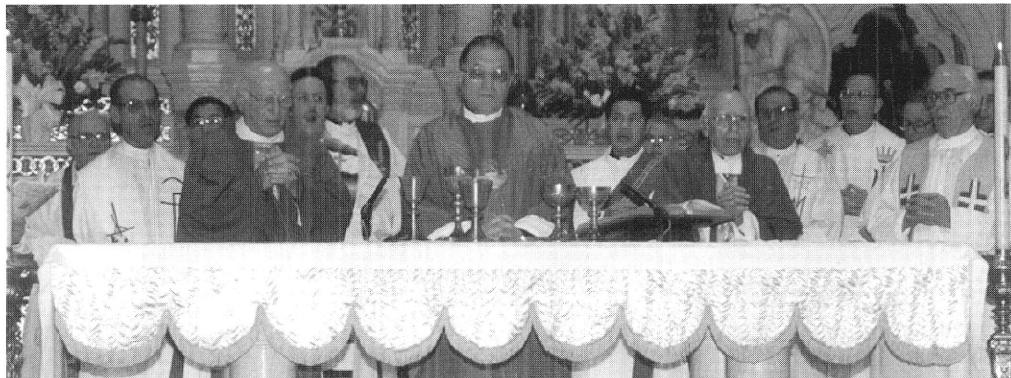
On this occasion, Father Giovannini went back to Italy for jubilee celebrations in Rome, Turin, and in his home town of Casabianca. Several of the testimonies already quoted indicate that his visit to the places where he had lived and to the people with whom he had worked were greeted with unbounded joy and festivity.

Unfortunately, his celebration at the home parish was marred by the sudden death of his brother Attilio, who, though ill with cancer, had nonetheless made the trip from the U.S.

On October 17, 1989 an earthquake struck the Santa Cruz-Watsonville area, wreaking havoc and destruction far and wide. Father Giovannini, by then eighty-five years of age, had, as usual, put in a hard day’s work at Saint



Visiting at Rosemead, 1992



*Sixtieth anniversary of Ordination , SS. Peter & Paul Church, 1991*

Francis Camp, and on his way home had stopped at a hardware store for some piece of equipment. It was 5:04 P.M. when, as he related, "suddenly everything (from nearby shelves) started to fall all around me. I couldn't move. I thought, 'this is it'." He suffered multiple injuries, though none of them life-threatening, as it became clear when he was rushed to the hospital for immediate attention.

In an interview to the local newspaper one year later, Father Giovannini's style came to the fore: "The earthquake didn't bother me; we are used to the ups and downs of life. Problems are nothing new to us."<sup>17</sup>

In 1991, Father Giovannini, again with the venerable Father Broccardo, celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of priestly ordination. Though respecting his wish to keep it in the family, the double diamond jubilee was announced by the provincial office and appropriately feted. Expressions of esteem and support were received from many quarters: the Holy Father's blessing, letters from local bishops, congratulations and testimonies from Salesians and friends. Father Richard McCormick, Provincial of the New Rochelle Province at the time, wrote:

"Others will recount the main events of your life in the family of Don Bosco, from your days at the Oratory of Valdocco, where you were inspired by the fatherliness and holiness of Father Philip Rinaldi, to your days with the saintly Father Binelli, and on through the many years of outstanding service in California, New Rochelle, and Turin. . . .

"What lives among us, however, is the precious memory of a gentle, kind, generous,

and encouraging leader. Indeed, you inspired confreres and friends by your serenity, your faith in divine Providence, your trust in Mary, Help of Christians, your fidelity to Don Bosco, your loyalty to the leadership of the Society.

"And many of us who had the privilege of having you as father, friend, and confidant still feel the effect of your gentle guidance."<sup>18</sup>

Everyone who was acquainted with Father Giovannini's career would agree. He certainly deserves recognition, admiration and love for the many contributions made out of his official capacities through the years. But we, his confreres here "at home," have more private and personal reasons for admiring him and loving him: his work among us, his personality, his style, his brotherly, as well as his fatherly presence—above all the example of an unswervingly faithful priestly and Salesian life, and finally of a holy death.

### **His Illness and Holy Death**

Father Giovannini was physically healthy and strong. He had never been ill a day in his life, certainly never seriously ill. He was a hearty eater; he worked long hours at hard manual labor. He used to joke about diets and physical exercise programs. But he was now eighty-nine years of age.

Early in the month of February , 1993 he began to complain of an itchy feeling all over his body, which in a short time became extremely intense and painful. The family doctor could not diagnose the condition and merely prescribed some patent remedy.



*Watsonville, 1990*

But the condition grew worse, causing great weakness and severe pain. He was taken to Santa Cruz Dominican Hospital, where the physicians diagnosed the condition as cancer of the pancreas. The tumor was so large that it blocked the ducts of the liver, so that his vital organs and his intestines were seriously affected. He was given but a few months to live.

After a short period of rest at home, the physicians advised and performed certain procedures designed to free the ducts and restore the liver's activity at least partially. This brought about temporary relief. Dr. Andrew Giovannini, Father Giovannini's nephew, who was at hand, suggested that the patient could then rest at home.

Salesians and people who visited him on his bed of pain came away edified and comforted by his peaceful, prayerful attitude. However, the period of reprieve was short. On Monday, March 8, Father Giovannini had to be rushed to Watsonville Community Hospital. He received again the holy Sacraments, gradually drifting into complete unconsciousness through the week. People kept flocking to his quiet bedside.

Groups of Salesians and friends took turns

watching and praying for him and with him day and night.

He passed away peacefully at 6:30 A.M., Sunday, March 14.

The solemn funeral Mass was celebrated in the Valley Church of Our Lady Help of Christians, in Watsonville, on Monday, March 22, His Excellency Sylvester Ryan, Bishop of Monterey, presiding, with the participation of a large congregation of priests and laity. The Christian burial service was held the following day in Richmond, California, where the body was interred in the Salesian cemetery, before a large group of Salesians and friends.

It was a happy occasion rather than a sad one, for such an active, rich, and fruitful life, and such a holy death, could only be reasons for rejoicing, not for tears.

During the luncheon, many took turns at eulogizing, with a generous sprinkling of humorous anecdotes, the beautiful, good, strong and gentle man that was Father Ernest Dominic Giovannini.

May he rest in peace!

--- Fr. Arthur Lenti, SDB  
DON BOSCO HALL, 1993

*T*riumphant amid the many realms  
of this life—  
Realms of greed, of hate and of strife—  
There is the realm of the wise and the just,  
Lying above us as a glory within a glory  
To which we can rise for fellowship  
As a plant stands up  
from the breaking hands of the wind  
To the air and dew of heaven!  
Realm of vision! Realm of truth!  
Realm of love!  
Open to us in hours of doubt and pain  
When black hands claw us from the pit.  
This is the good faith of the perseverance  
of the saints,  
Raised to the higher realm of Beauty!

--- "Linford Newman", *The New Spoon River*, Edgar Lee Masters, 1869-1950



Richmond, March 23, 1993

*O*, great ones who are dead, yet live;  
And *O*, ye living ones over the earth  
Who shall never die,  
Leave ajar the gates of your paradise of light  
That we may commune with you;  
And rise from the commonalty of little living  
To the fellowship of wisdom and dreams!

#### Footnotes and references:

<sup>1</sup> Father Bernard Tohill to Father Arthur Lenti, Hong Kong, April 26, 1993. Quotations from: Julius Caesar, V, v, Ant.; Hamlet, I, ii, Ham.; and Eccl 7:28.

<sup>2</sup> Recollections of Fr. Attilio Giovannini, Aptos, California, 1959 (through the present writer).

<sup>3</sup> John Setaro (Lopiano), the first American-born Salesian, was born in San Francisco, California in 1878. After his novitiate at Hawthorne, New York, in 1912, he was sent to Turin for his priestly studies and was ordained in 1917, the while serving on the General Council's staff till 1923. In 1923 Father Setaro was assigned to the mission of the Kimberleys, Australia, with Bishop Ernest Coppo as Vicar Apostolic. After the Salesian resigned from that mission in 1927, Father Setaro served briefly as Administrator of the mission at Carnarvon, and subsequently as Catechist in Rupertswood, Sunbury. In 1933, as he was preparing to return to California, he died in Melbourne, Australia, at the age of 55.

<sup>4</sup> Archival records of the New Rochelle Province, courtesy of Father Philip Pascucci.

<sup>5</sup> Reported by Father Thomas Prendiville.

<sup>6</sup> Testimony of Father Gabriel Zavattaro.

<sup>7</sup> Recollections of Father Anthony Di Falco.

<sup>8</sup> Archival records of the New Rochelle Province, courtesy of Father Philip Pascucci.

<sup>9</sup> Commemoration held at the Marian Shrine, West Haverstraw (NY), May 8, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Father Giovannini to Father Alvin Fedrigotti, July 26, 1945. "Boston has become a reality" is a reference to Don

Bosco's question in his second missionary dream of 1883, "When shall we go to Boston? They are waiting for us there." The Interpreter replied: "All in its own good time."

<sup>11</sup> Commemoration held at the Marian Shrine, West Haverstraw (NY), May 8, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> *Acts of the Superior Chapter* 36 (1955: #187), p. 7-9.

<sup>13</sup> The term "vocational school" renders globally the type of school usually designated in Salesian jargon as "for arts and trades," "professional," and "technical."

For a description of Father Giovannini's activity during this period I am indebted to Father Gaetano Franci, who served as Father Giovannini's secretary from 1959 to 1966. He has graciously provided information on, and assessments of Father Giovannini's work (March 16 and April 4, 1993). Father Franci is at present secretary of the Central Province of the Sacred Heart, Turin, Italy.

<sup>14</sup> "Acts of the 19th General Chapter, 8th April to 10th June 1965, Rome," in *Acts of the Superior Chapter* 47 (1966: #244), esp. p. 65-75 (Salesian Brother) and 113-129 (Vocational Schools).

<sup>15</sup> "Acts of the 19th General Chapter, 8th April to 10th July, 1965, Rome," in *Acts of the Superior Council* 47 (1966: #244), p. 21-26.

<sup>16</sup> Father Antonio Turati to Father James Collins, Como (Italy), April 5, 1993.

<sup>17</sup> *Register-Pajaronian*, Wednesday, October 17, 1990.

<sup>18</sup> Father Richard McCormick, Letter, New Rochelle, NY, January 6, 1991.



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