

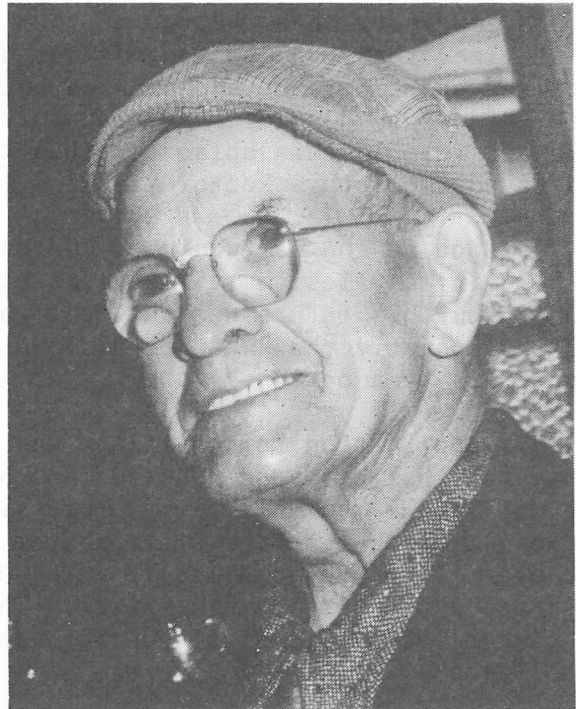
BR CELESTINE ACERNI (1890-1980)

18th August, 1980.

My dear confreres,

And so the last link with the pioneers of our Province has been broken. On the night of the 18th July 1980 Br. Celestine Acerni passed to his reward in the Sacred Heart Hospital, Moreland (Melbourne), where the Sacred Heart Sisters had nursed him with so much care and devotion over his final months.

Br. Celestine was a member of that band of missionaries which had been put together in 1923 in answer to an urgent request from the Propagation of the Faith to take over a Mission with the aborigines in North-Western Australia. As far back as 1900, the Trappists had begged the Salesians to take over the work they had begun in the Kimberleys in 1887. Eventually the Pallotines accepted this invitation and established there a community of priests and brothers drawn from Germany. In the confusion of World War I, it seemed that they had been forced to leave this Mission and so Rome set about finding a replacement. In 1921 Pius XI gave the Mission to the Salesian Congregation. Fr. Ernest Coppo, at that time Provincial of the New York Province, was called to Turin and consecrated Bishop and put at the head of a band of four priests and three Brothers, among them Br. Celestine Acerni. This first step made by the Salesian Congregation to establish itself in Australia ended two years later when it became clear that the Pallotines were once more able to carry on the work.



If we are to understand the man we must take into consideration his background and his experiences. If we are to appreciate the sterling qualities of our deceased confrere, we need to know something about his 'curriculum vitae'.

Celestine Acerni was born at Specchio (Parma) on the 29th April 1890, one of eleven children born to Agilberto Acerni and Angela Bazzinotti. This large family was supported by the returns from a farm where all the members played an active part. When Celestine was only six years old, his mother died.

In 1904 Celestine was enrolled as a technical student at the Oratory in Turin where Don Bosco had begun his work a half-a-century previously. The memory of our Founder was still very fresh under the care of his successor.



Blessed Michael Rua. Br. Celestine always had a great devotion to this saintly man from whom he imbibed many of the principles of religious and Salesian life which were to influence him for the rest of his days and which made of him such a remarkable man of God.

In 1908 Celestine expressed the wish to be a Salesian - an older brother was already studying in the diocesan seminary in Piacenza. Just when he was about to make a formal request to enter the novitiate, the First World War broke out and he was conscripted into the Italian Army. His experiences over the next four years must have made a deep impression upon him because he so often referred to them. It was only during a visit to this Province by Don Ziggotti when the two of them began exchanging war experiences that he realized that the Italian officer he had risked his life to save was the then Rector-Major. He had crawled out of his trench under heavy fire to grab this wounded soldier and had carried him on his back to safety. How he told and re-told this episode with a tremendous feeling of pride that he had saved the future Rector-Major!

As soon as the war was over, Celestine went back to Turin with his ideal of becoming a Salesian still before him. He had fought well for his king and country but his future was to lie fighting under the banner of another King and in a country that was not his own by birth but which certainly was to become his by adoption.

His application for novitiate was accepted and he went to Ivrea, that House that has prepared hundreds and hundreds of Salesians for work all over the world. He made his first profession into the hands of Fr. Charles Farina, himself a student at the Oratory from 1866 to 1870 and so had grown up under the eyes of Don Bosco himself. His novice was to know the Founder through this man and to imbibe his spirit. The profession took place on the 9th September 1919. His first posting was to the Agricultural School at Lombriasco.

In 1922 he was invited to join the missionary band that was preparing itself to go to Australia. Although he would have been more than happy to work the fields of Lombriasco all the rest of his life, he was equally happy to work the fields of the far-away lands if that is what the Superiors wanted him to do. Only when he arrived in the Kimberleys did he realize the tremendous difference between the green pastures of Piedmont and the arid, sun-scorched sands of North-Western Australia where even the trees he planted and lovingly nursed were devoured by white ants!

With the closing of the Mission Br. Celestine became a member of another pioneering community. With three Salesians from the Kimberleys and seventeen others a new House was established at Sunbury (Victoria) in 1928. Fr. Manassero was the Rector. If the first five years were difficult, the next five presented a challenge that was frightening! The author of 'The First Twenty-Five years' (of Salesian work in Australia) sums up the situation in these stark terms: "Some of the newcomers at Rupertswood found the early difficulties more than they could bear. Their discontent came to a head when a group of confreres sailed back to Europe. As the House chronicler gloomily points out: A very bleak day for the House when four priests leave with their unending pieces of luggage. No money left in the House". Those were the days when money had to be borrowed to buy a railway ticket to Melbourne and the day's meal depended on the success of a hunt for rabbits in the fields! Despite the difficulties, the heart-breaks and the frustrations, Br. Celestine soldiered on. At least here in the south of Australia he felt he was doing something useful. He was able to tend the vegetable garden without the menace of the white ants and the scorching heat; he tended the

poultry and he looked after the linen. Above all, he was living in a community where he could share his dreams.

From 1951 to 1957 he was doing similar work in Glenorchy (Tasmania). The last twenty-three years he spent at the Don Bosco Club and Hostel, assisting in the dormitory, sweeping the floors, maintaining the building. He continued at this humble yet so important task until the early months of this year when he had to be hospitalized. He came back to his community to celebrate his 90th birthday but that was to be his last visit.

There is so much to admire in this wonderful Salesian who was such an outstanding example of what Don Bosco wanted his Brothers to be. His sterling qualities were appreciated whilst he was with us and his memory will linger long in our hearts and in our minds. All of us who knew him feel we are much better people for that knowledge. To couch it in its most simple terms, he showed us that holiness does not depend on the studies we have done, the posts we have filled or the acclaim the world may give. It does depend, however, on the depth of our faith, hope and charity.

If one were asked to nominate those qualities that made Br. Celestine such an outstanding Salesian, I feel we could narrow them down to three:

- His deep understanding of the religious life lived out in our daily lives in a spirit of faith;
- His keen sense of community and the part each member must play to keep up the morale and to promote a spirit of joy;
- His wonderful understanding of the religious life as a life of service even before that word became a catch-cry.

In a letter written to Don Ricaldone some days after he had made his perpetual vows into the hands of Bishop Coppo in 1924, he sums up his whole feelings and attitude to religious vows: "The ceremony was solemn and moving (even if in blistering heat and miles from nowhere). At that moment all my miserable past was staring me in the face and I felt like taking off my shoes....." Like Moses, he had the impression that he was in the presence of something sacred, something awe-inspiring. This attitude never changed. All his life he was at the disposition of his Superiors, he persevered under conditions that would have wilted a 'smaller' man. To the end he had an extraordinary respect for Superiors. Many of us were embarrassed by his reverence for those whom he had known as young lads but, to him, now were guides and custodians of his spiritual life. Despite the difficulties he found he was never heard to speak unkindly of any confrere, let alone a Superior and this, in itself, places him on a level few of us have trodden.

To him the vow of obedience did not mean that you obey only when you agree with the order given or because you have a high regard for the man giving an instruction. Nor did it mean that a religious should not speak clearly to his Superior. He was never heard complaining of Superiors or of confreres with any but those he felt had the right to know. He certainly would not be a party to those who split communities in two by their criticisms or who share all their complaints with outsiders. One of his final remarks was: "I have always tried to do what my Superiors wanted me to do and now that the 'Big Boss' is calling me I am anxious to go".

His spirit of poverty was a legend in the Province. It was often irreverently called a 'spirit of recollection'. In every House where he worked he filled room after room with goods he collected: timber, nuts and bolts, boxes, clothing..... you name it and he had it! An indication that he felt his end was drawing near was the fact that he handed over the key

to his 'workshop' to his Rector! This was a sacred place because he felt he had boundless treasures stored therein that less thoughtful people may throw out as useless junk.

One of the things Br. Celestine missed most of all in the Kimberleys were his confreres. He loved the company of his fellow-Salesians and was ever on the alert to make the community in which he lived a happy one. He once expressed his views thus: "I have always tried to drive away sadness from the community and increase its spirit of joy". This simple expression sums up his whole life.

For example, he was very much aware that our dining rooms are also our common rooms. If we are to digest our food and look forward to our meals a spirit of joy must prevail there. Not for him the post-mortems, the nasty remark, the cutting word, the uncharitable thrust. He was always the centre of laughter and good feeling even when his migraine headaches must have made smiling and joking a difficult matter indeed! His stories, his playful banter, his deliberately planned dishes - tea on his cereals, wine in his cup of tea.... were all meant to provoke laughter whilst hurting none. His contributions in the recreation ground are fond memories for many of us - can we ever forget his appearances on the football field, dressed up in all sorts of fancy costumes, his movements like an elephant in a bed of daisies? Most of us preferred to play against him for, at least, we could avoid his bone-crushing contacts - playing with him tended to make one forget he might go easy on a team-mate! Those antics on the stage - no lines learnt but did that really matter? If what Telhard de Chardin says about joy is correct, that "joy is the most infallible sign of God's presence", then Br. Celestine lived continually in God's presence and did his best to help others do the same.

And service.... It is enough to mention his last years at Brunswick. He was happy to live in a dormitory with a crowd of young men who had their transistors blaring a good part of the day and the night. He was happy - and this was no mere pretence - to clean up rooms, wash floors, sweep stairs..... and all this for no other reason than to make sure these young men came home from work or studies to a clean home.

Br. Celestine now lies in our private cemetery at "Rupertswood" with so many of his pioneering confreres. As an old soldier he would have enjoyed the Guard of Honour provided by the lads of the Rupertswood Half-Battery resplendent in their uniforms, standing rigidly to attention before and throughout the requiem and at the graveside.

May his example inspire many others to serve as he had served.

Sincerely in Christ

Wallace L. Cornell S.D.B. Provincial.



*Br. Celestine - Novitiate Days,
Ivrea, 1918-19.*