

On November 23rd, 1940, the English Province was bereft of one of its most esteemed members by the death of

## Father WALTER GEORGE AUSTEN

Aged 61 years.

Father Austen was born on June 12th, 1879, in the cathedral city of Canterbury. In those inspiring precincts he grew up under the watchful eyes of his pious Catholic parents, Thomas and Mary Austen, attending the local elementary school, until at the age of thirteen, with the example of the "holy blissful martyr" ever before his mind, he felt himself called to devote his life more intimately to the service of God. With this intention he entered Battersea on September 21st, 1892, where with a handful of other boys he was placed in the first Latin Class presided over by Father Barni. A year later he commenced his novitiate under the prudent guidance of that sage and holy priest, Father Bonavia, the first Master of Novices in the English Province, and had the inestimable fortune of receiving the clerical habit from the hands of the Servant of God, Don Rua himself, who together with Bishop Cagliero had come to England for the opening and consecration of the Church of the Sacred Heart.

The scene of his first labours was the parish elementary school, where as a pupil teacher it soon became evident that he possessed in full measure all those qualities which go to make the complete teacher. He himself has left on record that he taught all day in the school, so that there could not have been much time left for him to pursue his secondary and philosophical studies, which, moreover, he had to do mainly by his own efforts. The acquisition of knowledge, however, presented no difficulty to his acute mind, and it was not long before he became a fully qualified Certificated Teacher. When in 1902 the post of Head Master fell vacant, though only 23 years of age and extraordinarily youthful in appearance, he was promoted to that office, which he administered with competence and thoroughness up to September 1907, when his reception of the Diaconate necessitated his resignation.

His work in the school showed him to be eminently capable in every respect both as a teacher and as an administrator, and revealed in him that personal kindness towards boys, which was characteristic of him all his life. The years following the termination of the Boer war were lean ones for the poor of London. The gaunt spectres of Unemployment and Hunger stalked the slums of Battersea, so that many children had to come to school ill-clad and underfed. Moved by the sight of their emaciated bodies and famished looks, Brother Bede, as he was then called, did all he could to alleviate their discomforts. For instance, he contrived somehow to supply many of them with a meal each day, and one particularly severe winter, through the kind offices of a London newspaper, he obtained fifty pairs of new boots for those who needed them. This spirit of Christian love revealed itself also in his constant readiness to help his less experienced associates with their studies, to some of whom he used to give private lessons. How he found the time for his own studies it is difficult to surmise, for in addition to his school work he was burdened with the editorship of the *Salesian Bulletin*, which at that time was a substantial monthly publication. Father Austen was a veritable glutton for work, sacrificing even his recreations in order to devote extra hours to the study of theology, for which the classes then provided were somewhat scrappy and irregular. What, however, was wanting in this respect he made up for by his own diligence, tenacity and keenness of intellect.

The long and arduous journey to the priesthood, towards which he had unswervingly striven almost unaided, was at length accomplished, when on December 21st, 1907, he was ordained by Bishop Amigo, and the open gates led him into the Lord's vineyard, where he laboured faithfully and unceasingly for the 33 years of his priestly life.

In the Battersea college, which had recently been re-organized and was fast developing into an efficient secondary school, Father Austen taught various classes, and was Catechist for several years, during which time, besides preparing for and passing with consummate ease the London degree of Bachelor of Arts, he wrote profusely for the press, notably the monthly issue of the *Salesian Bulletin*, and biographies of St. John Bosco and of the saintly boy Dominic Savio. Truly he was "a learned man and rich of holy thought and work."

After the transfer of the novices and philosophers from Burwash to Cowley he was appointed there as Prefect of Studies. He took a special interest in the university students, helping them by encouragement, advice and even example, for he followed a university course and earned for himself the degrees of Master of Arts and of Bachelor of Literature. During those years the charge of the parish also fell to his lot. In every way a model priest he never failed in his duty of attending to the welfare of his flock and of visiting them regularly, particularly the poor and needy. He was often known to go without his meals in order to give the consolations of religion to the sick and the dying. Like the good man of religion in the *Canterbury Tales*,

" This noble example to his sheep he gave  
That first he wrought and afterwards he taught ",

His rare gifts and ability could not fail to mark him for preferment, so that it was no surprise to anyone that, when in 1925 Father Macey retired from the rectorship of Chertsey, the Superiors selected him to fill the vacancy. He remained at Chertsey for six years, after which he was appointed as Rector first to Bolton in 1931, then to Battersea in 1934, and again to Bolton in 1937.

Under his direction all went well. Though not lacking the dignity and assurance which is expected in a Superior, he was easy of approach, disarmingly cheerful and friendly. His appreciation of order, punctuality and attention to details, was blended with understanding of human frailty and of the need of constant encouragement and reminders. Nevertheless he persuaded more by the meticulous performance of his own duties than by drawing attention of others to any shortcomings of which they might have been guilty themselves.

Mention must here be made of two abiding qualities, which others so much admired in him. The first was his concern for the appearance of the chapel. With the Psalmist he could truly say: " O Lord, I have loved the beauty of thy house, and the place where thy glory dwelleth," for he devoted much time and attention to the decoration and adornment of the House of God, and to the services of the altar to make them bright and attractive. The second was his remarkable kindness to all and particularly to the boys resident in the college; he took almost a mother's care of them and was continually watchful to safeguard their health. No attention was too small when it was a question of their welfare.

Father Austen, though almost entirely self-taught, was a man of wide culture and learning, an easy and fluent speaker, and a writer of faultless prose notable for its simplicity, clearness and vigour. He loved poetry, music and art, and his soul was always thrilled at the revelations of the finger of God in the glories of Creation. He moved in a spirit of deep piety and reverence of the presence of God, his love for Whom was reflected in his gentleness and affability, and in his concern for the spiritual and intellectual progress of his younger brethren. His conversation could be edifying, entertaining, cheerful and even jovial, though never vulgar or uncharitable. He himself seems to have been oblivious of his own attainments, for he was most humble and unassuming, and very appreciative of the good qualities of those around him.

But of all his claims to our admiration, his indefatigable spirit of work, the hall-mark of every true Salesian, is undoubtedly the greatest. By his early companions of Battersea it was observed that he had put away the things of a child while still in his tender years; his vocation was all that mattered; that was the set purpose and goal toward which all his thoughts tended and every effort contributed; and the realization of the priesthood was but the occasion for him to extend his activities to other and vaster spheres. All his many talents were put out to interest. His energy was tremendous. It is no exaggeration to say that he laboured really too hard, and that, like a piece of fine machinery which being overworked seizes and stalls, he exceeded his powers of endurance, and died worn out.

Though this worthy Son of Don Bosco by the strict observance of the holy Rule throughout his long and fruitful career in our Pious Society, and his edifying patience in suffering during his last days, has surely secured for himself the reward of heavenly bliss, nevertheless not knowing the decrees of God's justice we must not neglect to pray for his eternal repose, whilst striving to imitate the noble example of his virtuous life, so that when our turn comes to present ourselves before the tribunal of God we may be found as prepared and as full of merits and good works as he was.

Your devoted confrère in Christ,

F. V. COUCHE, S.C.,  
*Provincial.*