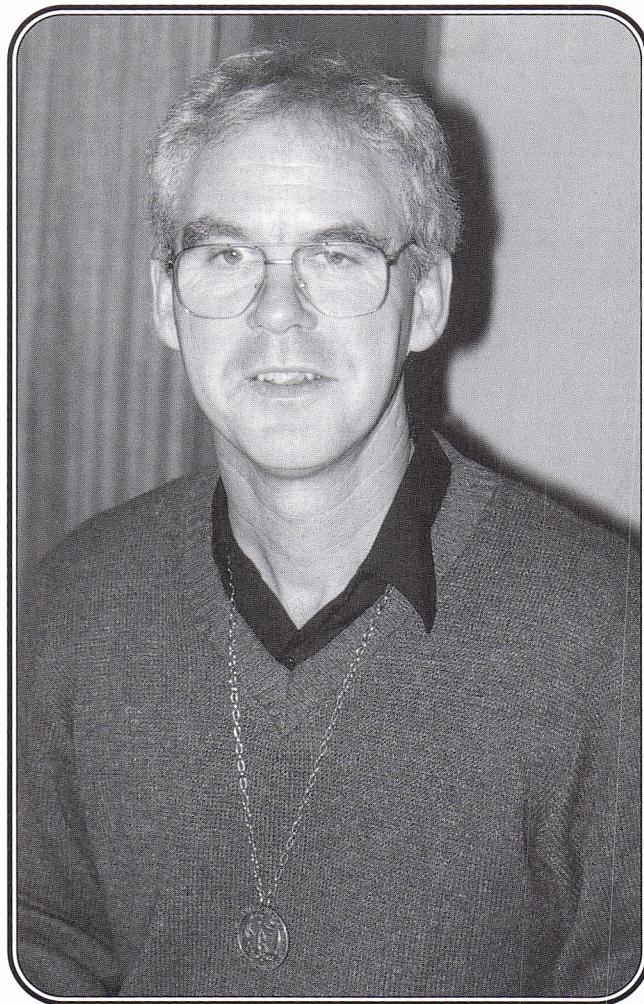


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# **Fr. Denis Halliday S.D.B.**

*Well done good and faithful servant; take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. (Matt 25; 21,34).*



**(1946 - 1997)**



**F**r. Denis Halliday was diagnosed as having a Motor Neurone condition early in 1997. The news did not come as a surprise to him as his father Gerald had died of the same condition, and early warning signs were apparent. Denis spent the next five months preparing for his death and endured the rapid onset of this muscle wasting disease with what might best be described as intelligent patience. At no time did he surrender his dignity, at all times he sought to safeguard the quality of his life. Denis drew people to him; they came to sympathise with him and left with their own lives enhanced.

Father Denis Halliday was the eldest of four children: Denis, Robert (dec.), Martin and Brendan. His parents, Gerald and Kath, who were greatly liked by Denis' fellow Salesians, lived at Chadstone, an eastern suburb of Melbourne. Denis was sent to school at Salesian College Chadstone (1958 - 63) and the other three boys followed him there. Denis from the beginning was an especially gifted student. After joining the Salesians and completing his initial studies Denis was sent to Savio College, Glenorchy for his "practical training". He studied for the priesthood at Catholic College which had been established for the education of seminarians from the Victorian and Tasmanian dioceses as well as for the members of a number of religious congregations, including the Salesians. In addition, Denis completed a Bachelor of Social Work at the University of Melbourne. He spent eighteen of the next twenty-four years at Boys' Town in Engadine, Sydney, with only very brief stints by way of a break at a number of other Salesian houses. While at Boys' Town he began a Ph.D study of the work of Boys' Town. During this time he was awarded a Churchill Fellowship in recognition of the quality of the studies he was doing. His last six months, prior to moving to Nazareth House where he died, were spent in the community at Ferntree Gully Melbourne.

The gospel (John 14:1-6), which was chosen by Denis' family for his funeral Mass, draws our attention to Jesus' departure and reminds us:

*Do not let your hearts be troubled.*

*Believe in me*

*I am the way the truth and the life*

It is a gospel for disciples in a new era. Denis was a disciple of Jesus whom he once described as the “one true non-trivialising companion”. Denis' departure has issued in a new era for us and we will profit from repeating those words of Jesus:

*Do not let your hearts be troubled.*

*Believe in me*

*I am the way the truth and the life*

The fundamental theme of this gospel, especially as it continues, is that Jesus' mission will be accomplished through us, his followers. Denis has influenced many of his family, friends and fellow Salesians to such an extent that we will accomplish Denis' mission in our lives. Our own calling from God has been influenced and coloured by the career of Denis Halliday.

Amazing as it seems, Jesus Christ never wrote a single word. Denis, too, was destined never to personally complete his doctoral thesis. He was fascinated by the role that the Greek classical tradition had in the context of adolescent residential care, adolescent education, and family breakdown. He did a study of 'pathology', 'dysfunction', 'therapy' and related words, concluding that in this country especially, it is the 'something is wrong' model that operates in our discourse, right down to the reference to 'special needs' students. He proposed and implemented at Boys' Town another discourse which he claimed is equally part of the classic Greek tradition - the wellness model, the 'something is right' model.

Denis was priest in every sense: a leader of community at the Salesian house Boys' Town, Engadine, Australia, where he worked

over a space of eighteen years, a witness to Christ's compassion for the poor, an articulator of the Christian Salesian vision, prophet of the cost which society will inevitably have to pay if it abandons youth who are beyond its margins. Denis was a true father to the young (and not so young). Typically Denis rarely appeared to be in charge of anything; rather, whatever he was doing others were welcome to enjoy. *Believe in me! I am the way the truth and the life!*

Truth has its own power. Denis was always very precise in his use of words, even in seemingly trivial matters. "Soy drink" not "soy milk" - and of course it could get quite maddening if the matter was of importance. Denis was confident that the truth, once adequately framed in language, had power to profoundly affect events. He released his words carefully and with full intent.

Denis was at his most maddening when indulging in his habit of answering every question with a question. It infuriated some of us at one time because we thought it easy to ask questions - the trick, we felt, was to answer them. Now we are not so sure.

In every possible way Denis kept pushing, and so kept us pushing, at the boundaries. He was the one who pioneered the use of the Blairgowrie rock pools by the Dromana campers, so moving the Don Bosco Camp into a new style of operating. He kept pushing our thinking with his relentless habit of answering every question with a question. We felt that he was at once moving us further out into the deep and assuming that we were already accustomed to drawing closer to the mystery. Many of us left every encounter with Denis - and that is what it was, an encounter, feeling good about ourselves and our place in the scheme of things. Behind all the questions he posed was this assumption that we were fit to ask these

questions and that peace was to be found in the seeking. This quality of 'questioning' / 'searching' was his own most attractive characteristic. Denis in his own person presented as a kind of parable. He left people with deeper questions than they had before.

Everyone has their stories about Denis. He was the stuff of stories, of legends. One community member's most memorable words to him (according to Denis) were, "Denis, the next time you are doing something really crazy let me know and I'll be in it." Years and years later he could still chuckle merrily about that. Whether the words say more about him or the community member is, we suppose, a bit of a toss up.

Denis is not an easy person to categorise. He was complex. Every word that describes him has to be balanced with its opposite: he was, for example, fragile... and yet durable enough to spend eighteen years at Boys' Town when others amongst us could survive only two or three. Aloof... yet he made it easy to be in close touch with him and to speak of the nearest subjects.

The community found the way Denis adjusted to the slow loss of his independence and the rapid approach of death from a Motor Neurone condition most instructive. He liked to talk to people individually and helped many people who, theoretically, were there to assist him over the last few months. What he expected from people was heartfelt and expressed sympathy for his physical condition; what made him angry were pious platitudes that expressed the idea that somehow he was lucky. We are not sure he always hid his anger well. His difficulty in breathing was, of course, his greatest source of anxiety. Whatever medical provision there was he investigated thoroughly. Denis benefited greatly from the sleep machine, the

special bed and special chair. We are grateful to the care agencies, Nazareth House, Bethlehem Hospital, and the Motor Neurone Association in this regard, and to the medical fraternity generally. Denis kept a collection of nature videos which soothed him for the bad times which he knew must inevitably come. He had a library of music which he used to ease his stress. Denis avoided even minor forms of stress in an effort to regularise his breathing. The rhythm of the rosary he found most helpful; the rosary was a habit with him through Salesian life. Books which focussed on his situation were of particular help to him and he had quite a collection which soon became a circulating library for his many visitors.

His family and close friends were his greatest solace and support, especially Brendan and Martin, his brothers. May they be content with knowing that they gave Denis the comfort he needed to win his way through. Denis could be incredibly demanding at times; he will expect of them and us that we, too, win our way through. Denis, may your soul and the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace, Amen!

The Salesian Community  
Ferntree Gully

**Fr. Denis John Halliday S.D.B.**

**BORN:** ..... 21 June 1946

**PROFESSED:** ..... 31 January 1965

**ORDAINED:** ..... 19 February 1973

**DIED:** ..... 26 July 1997