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## **Father Dennis Handley S.D.B.**



**13.9.1949 - 4.3.2004**

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## Father Dennis Handley S.D.B.

**O**n March 4 2004, Fr Dennis Handley entered eternal life. His brother Michael and the Provincial, Fr Ian Murdoch, were at his bed side.

There is much that could be written about Dennis the man, Dennis the Salesian and Dennis the Priest, but each of these is a facet that make up who Dennis was.

Dennis was born in Melbourne on 13 September 1949, the first of Ron and Eileen's four children: Dennis, Michael, Gerard and Lisa. As the eldest in the family, Dennis seemed to have had a special pull on his parents, and already at an early age he was a very self assured boy. His brother Gerard, in his eulogy at the funeral Mass, spoke of the times when young Dennis was able to convince his parents of things when he patently did not know much about them.

This sense of self-assuredness was one of the endearing human qualities for those who knew him well, and for others a source of awe and amazement at the depth and breadth of his knowledge. It was a trait that Dennis used fully. He used it to inspire many of his students and staff to set out along new paths, new ways of seeing reality as one of his colleagues wrote in a farewell tribute back in 1987: *"Over the years I have witnessed a number of changes at St Joseph's and I have to admit that there were times when I was doubtful of success for some of Dennis' plans. That success did come is a tribute to Dennis' clear vision, single-mindedness and tireless drive."*

Dennis did his secondary schooling at Salesian College, Chadstone (Vic). It was while studying for his Matriculation in 1965 that Dennis felt God calling him to be a Salesian. He subsequently entered the Salesian Aspirantate/Pre-Novitiate and in 1968 he was accepted as a

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Novice and made his Novitiate at Lysterfield (Vic). On 31 January 1969 he made his first profession. Dennis was now well on the way to answering the call he felt so strongly. These initial years as a Salesian saw Dennis immersed in philosophical studies and doing a Teachers Training Course.

Dennis' first appointment as a Salesian was to Boys' Town, Engadine (NSW). The collection of snapshots that Dennis kept from those two years show a younger man involved with the Boys' Town residents in their various activities: sport, hikes, camps. Dennis loved sport and though, as his brother Michael said in his eulogy, *'his skill level was easily surpassed by his eagerness'*, he was always totally committed, be it as a participant or as a coach, whether it was football, running, netball, canoeing or tennis. For Dennis, St John Bosco's maxim, *'love what the young love so that they will in turn love what you love'*, formed if not the conscious at least the subconscious basis of much of his *modus operandi*. It worked for St John Bosco and it worked for Dennis. The genuine outpouring of grief and bewilderment by so many of his students and colleagues past and present, at his funeral at Salesian College *Rupertswood* and at the memorial Masses at Xavier College and at Ss. Peter and Paul's Parish, Gawler, was a testimony to the large number of people whose lives Dennis had touched. They felt that they had lost a friend and an advocate, someone whom they could trust.

In 1975, after a two year appointment at Salesian College *Rupertswood* Sunbury (Vic), Dennis began his immediate preparation for the priesthood which culminated with his Ordination on 10 June 1978.

Dennis was then assigned to the Salesian Community at St Joseph's, Ferntree Gully, (Vic), at first as a Teacher and later as Deputy Principal. Teaching, coaching, organizing Geography excursions to the Centre of Australia, training and coaching for the canoeing marathon down the mighty River Murray were some of the extra curricular activities that filled Dennis' day. But all these activities never overshadowed his

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priesthood. He had become a Salesian and a Priest to be, in the words of our Rule, *'a sign and bearer of the love of God to the young'*. Dennis met the young where they were at, loved what they loved and sowed the seed of God's word in their hearts.

In 1988, Dennis was asked to take up the position of Rector and Principal at St Mark's, Port Pirie (SA), an R-12 school. Dennis brought to his new position his zest for life, his commitment and Salesian understanding of education and his love for the young.

It could perhaps be easier to describe Dennis's human achievements than the less visible components of his life, his priesthood, his salesianity and his spirituality. Dennis was not afraid to reach out or to meet people especially those in 'messy' situations. And again one could easily dismiss his involvement in the various sporting activities as *his way* of keeping fit or as a pleasurable pastime. On many occasions around the dinner table, with all the banter and the fun that characterized dinner-time with Dennis, he would comment on incidents, events or people he had observed or on what had happened. It was obvious that for him, intuitively, the sport arenas were part of the continuum of his Salesian commitment. Dennis 'preached' as much on the netball or tennis court as he did from the pulpit - and he was very good on both pulpits. To many people Dennis was 'my friend the priest'.

Dennis loved celebrating Mass and the Sacraments, and in the business of his life he was faithful to his community morning prayer and to the Eucharist. On weekends he would volunteer to help out in the various parishes in the Archdiocese of Adelaide as he did in Melbourne and in Port Pirie, when stationed there. He firmly believed in the importance of symbols and pageantry in the celebration of the Eucharist with the young. It was with a great deal of satisfaction that he would recount of his involvement in the preparations for the Catholic Schools Year 2000 Jubilee celebrations at the Adelaide Oval. A number of people on that preparatory

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committee were inclined to understate the event – not Dennis. It had to be big, well prepared; it had to be an unforgettable experience for all participants. At the local level, on that occasion he managed to convince SA Rail to bring a train onto a rarely used train track just across from Xavier College and to build a temporary platform so the students could easily travel to the event.

No effort, no expense were ever spared in preparing for the yearly college feast-day, *Xavier Day*, where the Eucharist thoroughly prepared and choreographed, had pride of place. He would often say that these were the things the students would remember and in later years would say with pride: *'I was there, it was a great celebration'*. It may help them in later years...

In 1994 Dennis was asked to be the founding Principal of a new Catholic Secondary College at Gawler (SA). He was presented with a dusty, wind-swept field and an office in the township of Gawler. I have often wondered of late whether Dennis ever saw a symbolic link between Don Bosco's Pinardi field, and shed and the sheep paddock on which he built Xavier College! One thing is sure: Don Bosco's vision to educate the needy children in Turin became Dennis' vision for Xavier College at Gawler. So, like at Valdocco, Xavier College under Dennis' leadership became, *'a home that welcomes, a school that prepares for life and a playground where friends meet and enjoy themselves'*.

No detail was overlooked in the building of the College. The Principal's office had to be situated near the main students' gathering area, with a door that gives onto it. That door was always open and students were free to drop in – which they did in numbers. One of the regrets Dennis had as he prepared to leave Xavier to take up his new position as Principal at Salesian College *Rupertswood* Sunbury, was that the new chapel which would have completed his master plan was still on the drawing board.

The awareness that Dennis would have liked to continue in his role as Principal at Xavier but that in obedience he was taking up his new

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role at Sunbury, blinded us to the fact that his visible emotion – so uncharacteristic of Dennis – and his forgetfulness, which we put down to stress, were part of the symptoms of the illness that had overtaken him.

Dennis was encouraged to take some time off to rest. He was due to go to Tugun (Qld), to visit his parents and brother after Christmas. He agreed to anticipate the visit. His brother Gerard saw him with 'fresh eyes' and realized the gravity of Dennis' condition. The prognosis from the doctors was very pessimistic: a brain tumor, probably malignant and very aggressive. On Christmas Eve 2003 Dennis had surgery but the tumor had already spread so deeply that total removal without damaging brain tissue was not possible.

After surgery Dennis spent some weeks recovering with his brother Gerard's family, close to his parents. His brother Michael from Melbourne, his sister Lisa from London came to visit him and stayed with him as did the Provincial, Fr Ian Murdoch and the Vice Provincial, Fr John Papworth, as well as other Salesians and many of his friends who flew especially to Queensland to see and be near him. Dennis expressed a strong wish to spend the remaining weeks or months of his life in his beloved Gawler. The community and his many friends made sure that he was properly cared for and all his needs attended to. Coming back to Gawler gave Dennis the opportunity to say his good-byes to friends and colleagues.

The salient moments of Dennis' final stay at Gawler which also sum up his great love for the Priesthood and for Education, were his presence at the Sunday Eucharist in the parish and attending a College Assembly to present the *Dux of the College Medal*, aptly named in his honour, '*The Fr Handley Medal*'.

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Unfortunately after a few short weeks Dennis' condition started to deteriorate to the point where he needed twenty-four hour specialized care and so he was transferred to the Little Sisters of the Poor in Northcote (Vic). There Dennis received professional and loving care from the Sisters and the staff until his death.

At the time of his ordination Dennis had chosen as his motto this quote from Teilhard de Chardin:

*Give me to recognize in other men, Lord God, the radiance of your own face.*

*The invisible light of your eyes, shining in the face of things, has already driven me into undertaking the work I had to do and into facing the difficulties I had to overcome...*

*May the Risen Christ keep me young for God's greater glory – young, that is, optimistic, active, smiling, perceptive.*

Fr Ian Murdoch in his homily at Dennis' Funeral Mass summed up what we all believe and feel:

*"The Risen Christ kept him young, that is, optimistic, active, smiling and perceptive, until the end. Now Dennis bears the heavenly image, the life-giving spirit in all its fullness, a share in the risen life of Christ."*

Please pray for the repose of Dennis' soul and for his parents Ron and Eileen, for his brothers Michael and Gerard and for his sister Lisa and their respective families.

Germano Baiguini SDB

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### **Dates for the Necrology**

**Born:** 13 September 1949 (Melbourne)

**First Profession:** 31 January 1969 (Lysterfield)

**Perpetual Profession:** 31 January 1975 (Chadstone)

**Ordination to the Priesthood:** 10 June 1978 (East Bentleigh)

**Entered Eternal Life:** 4 March 2004

