

Salesian House
Farnborough
Hants
9 August 1993

Fr J Christopher Harris SDB

"All the world's a stage and
one man in his time plays many parts"

Dear Confreres and Friends

Fr Joseph Christopher Harris was born about six months before the outbreak of World War One. Some of his early schooling was done in the Argentine, and later in Bournemouth, his home town. It is not recorded how he made his first acquaintance with the Salesians, but in 1929 found him as a pupil at Salesian College, Farnborough, where he remained for two years. During those two years the torch of his vocation was lit, and in 1931 he entered the Salesian Novitiate at Cowley, near Oxford. He stayed at Cowley until 1934, during which time he did his novitiate and the two years of study of Philosophy, which were his first steps on the road to the Priesthood. In 1934 he went to Chertsey for three years to teach in the Salesian College, Highfield Road. Then from 1937-41, he was at the Studentate of Theology at Blaisdon Hall, near Gloucester. There he completed his final studies for the Priesthood, and during this time he ministered to the sick in the infirmary for two and a half years. On July 20 1941, he was ordained priest. He then went back to Chertsey to teach, and in 1944 he became Catechist.

In 1945, at the end of the War, he went to Battersea to teach, and to study for a Degree at London University, and to be Librarian, and he remained there until 1949. From 1949 to 1953 he was Headmaster at Cowley, but then returned to Battersea to teach and to take up the Librarian's job again for three years. In February 1956 we saw a new talent emerge, when he served as Chaplain in the Royal Air Force for the next three years - and very smart he looked too in his uniform. In 1959 he returned to Battersea, and once again became Catechist. In 1962 he became Rector at Chertsey, and he held that post until 1967 when he was appointed Provincial Economist. In 1973 his workload was reduced somewhat, and he became Bursar at Farnborough, an office he held until 1981. During this time he made a point of being kind and generous to that amorphous section of society who go from place to place, from job to job, looking all the time for help - money, food and drink. Fr Chris was generosity personified, and made many a friend for life. This attractive trait in his character was not forgotten by the Gentlemen of the Road, and it must have filled his heart with a heavenly glow to see present at his funeral Mass, one of those 'needy' cases, one who is well known to many Salesians of the Province as Paddy Burton/Porter. He came, still looking rather lost and hopeful, and recognising the Salesians of yesteryear, to be present at Fr Chris' Requiem Mass and Funeral, and to express, on behalf of all his 'pals', a last sincere "Thank You" to his generous benefactor.

From 1962 -88, Fr Christopher was on the Committee of the Catholic Truth Society, where his work was greatly appreciated and acknowledged by letter after his death. He served for two years in the Parish in Newmarket, where his skills as preacher, confessor and administrator were recognised by His Lordship Bishop Clark, who

wrote to thank the Salesians for "lending Fr Chris for so long" "Fr Chris", he said, "had left behind him the memory of a fine priest, who had impressed everyone by his devoted and generous contribution to the pastoral care of the Diocese of East Anglia". The Parish Priest of Newmarket, Fr Tony Rodgers, was present at the Requiem Mass to wish Fr Chris a priestly farewell.

Finally he became Chaplain to the Sisters of Mercy in Swanage, Dorset, and it was while he was there, in 1988, that he had the first of the strokes which were to incapacitate him more and more as time went on. He became increasingly unable to cope, and after spending some time in his own Community in Farnborough, he went to Cedar Lodge, a local Nursing Home. Eventually when he needed twenty-four hours a day care, he went to a Home with strong Salesian connections - the Sunbury Nursing Homes, near Chertsey. Here he was gradually able to resign himself, under the devoted and loving care of the Nursing Staff, to let himself rest in the arms of his Redeemer and God, and quietly and calmly wait and prepare for the end. The transformation, noticed by all, to a state of being at peace with his condition was a great grace, and was certainly helped on by the understanding and care of the staff of the Nursing Home.

The Mass was the kingpin of Fr Christopher's life. He said his Mass every day during his illness, until that became physically impossible. Then the Community of Farnborough arranged to say Mass in his room, and he received Holy Communion. Sadly even this had to stop, and he could take no active part at all. For some time he was to all appearances unconscious and unable to take food, but he had minute by minute care from the staff of the Nursing Home. Finally, God heard his prayers and took him to Himself on the morning of Wednesday, July 7th. The Funeral Mass was concelebrated in the Salesian Parish Church of Mary, Help of Christians, and he is buried in the Salesian plot in Ship Lane cemetery in Farnborough.

From all this we may, by way of Epilogue, say that, in spite of faults which are to be found in different ways in all of us, he was a highly efficient administrator, whose opinion was respected and his advice sought. He was perhaps a bit of a 'loner', but he had a wonderful, if somewhat hidden sense of humour, which bubbled over with merriment at times, and made him - quite literally - speechless. Tributes have been received from those he served so well and so generously - His Lordship the Bishop of East Anglia, the Catholic Truth Society, friends from his R A F days, and from Salesian Past Pupils, from as far away as California.

"A Preest ther was and that a worthy man", as Geoffrey Chaucer might have summed him up.

May he rest in the peace of the Lord

Fr H Douglas SDB

For the Necrology:

Fr Joseph Christopher Harris
born Wimbledon London, 11th March 1914
died Sunbury, Middlesex, 7th July 1993
in 79th year of his age
61st of his Profession
52nd of his Priesthood