

J. M. J.



SALESIAN COLLEGE,
BATTERSEA, LONDON, S.W.11

March 8th, 1943

My dear Confrères,

On February 11th, 1943, God again visited this Province and called to Himself the soul of

JOHN JOSEPH HICKEY, Priest

Aged 53

John Hickey was born at Bermondsey, London, on the 20th July, 1889. His parents were Maurice and Helena Hickey (*née* Murphy). It was a very Catholic household and in an atmosphere of intense Catholic piety the young man grew up. The activities of the East London Catholic body soon claimed his services and his loyalty. He became an altar server in his very young days and soon was a prominent member of the boys' Sodality. The late Canon Segesser founded a Catholic Boys' Brigade which had as its object to keep the Catholic youth of the district united in recreation and piety, and young John Hickey joined the famous brigade and became an active and zealous member. At the age of 17 he felt that he was called to a more intimate life for God and decided to try his vocation in the ranks of the sons of St. John Bosco.

He entered Battersea in the September of 1906 and his energy was at once in evidence. Work — hard physical work — was the main occupation of the Salesians of those early days, and of this work John Hickey took his share. His studies were the object of his anxious care and he used every possible moment to acquire the necessary knowledge to enable him to be accepted into the Novitiate. This he succeeded in doing in 1908, and in that year he began his noviceship at Burwash. He was clothed with the Religious Habit in the October of the same year by the late Very Rev. Father C. B. Macey. On the 8th December of the following year he was admitted to his first profession.

His first appointment was to the Salesian School at East Hill in 1911. His zeal in teaching and his indefatigable work for the boys under his charge — qualities that were to be characteristic of the whole of his life — were soon remarked. He never spared himself in the preparation of his work and his own energy communicated itself to the boys he taught. In due course he was transferred to the Salesian School at Farnborough. Owing to the outbreak of war in 1914, the supply of teachers was severely curtailed, while the number of boys seeking entrance to the school was sharply increased. This entailed much hard work on the personnel of the school. Self-sacrifice, unceasing toil, devotion to duty were demanded of him, and as a true Salesian he was never found wanting. He was wholly and entirely devoted to the work entrusted to his zeal.

He was admitted to the Final Profession on December 8th, 1914, and he immediately signalled his irrevocable enrolment among the sons of St. John Bosco by redoubling his efforts to sacrifice himself still more for his work. For five rapid years he spent himself at Farnborough for the boys in his charge. His days were very full — assisting, teaching, engaged in all the multifarious activities of the zealous Salesian. During this time, despite the press of his scholastic duties, he was endeavouring to improve his own mental training and equipment. The hours of night were reclaimed from sleep to be spent in Theological Studies that would enable him to be admitted to the priesthood. Work, work, and still more work . . . intellectual work, physical work, mental strain, all these were the lot of those years of war and stress. But he won through, and on February 9th, 1919, he was raised to the priesthood by Bishop Cotter of Portsmouth.

The war was over. The studies of the growing number of novices were fast becoming an urgent problem. Father Hickey had, during the foregoing years, proved himself a capable teacher. He was chosen to direct the studies at the Salesian Novitiate at Burwash, but had soon to relinquish his charge to take up the post of Maths. Master at the Battersea College. In 1921 he was appointed Prefect of Studies at the Provincial House, whence he was transferred to the School at East Hill in a like capacity in 1922. The East Hill School was closed in the following year and Father Hickey returned to Battersea as Maths. Master. During the whole of his Salesian life Father Hickey had been a keen student, ever anxious for his intellectual progress, ever alert for the spare moment that could be turned to good use to acquire more knowledge. The new term began and Father Hickey devoted his spare time to his life-long ambition — the preparation for the London B.A. degree. But once again he was to be disappointed. Scarcely had the term started when he was taken ill. At first it was thought to be some passing ailment. His condition soon deteriorated with alarming rapidity until his very life was in danger. For several weeks the crisis endured, he hovered between life and death. Recourse was had to Our Lady, Help of Christians and Ven. Dominic Savio, and God was pleased to spare this valuable life. Slowly Fr. Hickey returned to health, and after a short convalescence he was back again with all his old ardour engaged in Salesian activities.

He was appointed Prefect of Studies at Cowley in 1926 and in 1928 he succeeded in obtaining his B.A. degree at London University. Now began the most active and successful part of his whole life. He was appointed Prefect of Studies at Battersea and held this office from 1929-1940. The Battersea College had applied for and obtained recognition by the Board of Education. Father Hickey devoted all his energies, all his zeal in helping to make the College efficient and progressive. The organisation of the studies demanded by the new status of the College was his first care, and it might be said that the prosecution of study was ever the object of his special care whether for himself or for the boys. A very high standard of efficiency was attained and maintained throughout all his tenure of office. The results of the public examinations bear ample and eloquent testimony to the success of Father Hickey's work. The administrative work increased with the years, and Father Hickey's teaching hours had perforce to be lessened. But his example of hard work, keen assistance and watchful care was as bright and constant as ever. He spared no effort to make the school as up-to-date as possible. He was prodigal of his time, of his strength, of his small leisure in the cause of the education of the Catholic youth that came to the Battersea College. He was a model to young and old alike. No effort was too hard, no task too formidable for his zeal. Within a short time he added a 6th Form to the now existing two-stream college. Nor did his efforts cease there. He was keenly interested in every boy that came to the school. If he noticed that a boy was neglecting his work, or was not doing his best, he examined very carefully the circumstances under which the boy lived and worked. If he found that there was any call for his charity he gave it unsparingly. He made himself familiar with the social services and advantages which are now at the disposal of the growing child. He made sure that, if any of the boys entrusted to his care was entitled to these services, then these services were put at his disposal. He did a great deal of this work in secret, for he was the soul of discretion and confidence. No word of any boy's social condition ever escaped him. Only those who were on very intimate terms with him over a period of years knew this side of his activity.

His interest with the boys was not limited to their stay at the College. When the day came for the boys to leave, Father Hickey was unsparing in his efforts to find them a position suited to their abilities and education. No boy ever appealed for help in vain. He had many points of contact for employment and these he used without respite in his endeavour to get the boys into a suitable position. His efforts met with considerable success. The College went from strength to strength. For years Father Hickey had been longing for a more modern set of buildings for the College. This was an urgent necessity if the Provincial House was to make the progress that the education authorities demanded. In 1938 it seemed that this need was to be met. Plans were drawn up for a new school. In 1939 demolition was begun on the old buildings. Reorganisation for the difficult period of the building of the new school was complete. It seemed that Battersea was to make one more step towards fulfilling St. John Bosco's dictum that one day it would be one of the most important houses of the Congregation. However, there were malignant forces abroad — forces that were to uproot not only those plans of Battersea but the peace of the whole world. War was in the air and evacuation came every day nearer.

Already in 1937 the doctor had urged Father Hickey to take a long rest. His unstinted work had dangerously weakened an already worn-out constitution. But Father Hickey would not rest. There was so much to do; Battersea was progressing and he must needs do more than he was able to further this progress. In the September of 1939 the war came to our own land. Evacuation became the pressing need and the object of Fr. Hickey's care. He took the keen interest in this that he had taken in every other aspect of his Salesian life. He was now ill indeed. He visited the boys evacuated in the country and on one of his visits was seized with a recurrence of the old trouble and had perforce to rest for a short time. But he could find no rest, since the boys were scattered far and wide and there was real danger that the Battersea College would soon lose its identity and cease to exist as a Catholic College. To avert this calamity, Father Hickey worked might and main. He interviewed authorities, he consulted superiors, he taxed his rapidly decreasing strength far beyond its power. But he succeeded in his endeavour. The Battersea College was saved from extinction. With the active and zealous co-operation of his superiors he obtained that the Philosophy House at Cowley, Oxford, should be placed at the disposal of the Battersea College. Now began a new round of interviews. Local authorities, educational authorities, all had to be interviewed and co-ordinated before the evacuated boys could be re-evacuated and the boys in London gathered together to be evacuated simultaneously to their new home at Cowley. At last it was accomplished, and in October 1939 the school moved to this new foundation to begin a fresh period of trial and development. Its success in these difficult days, the regularity of its studies, the efficiency of its teaching, the outstanding results of the war-time examinations, all bear testimony to the success of his efforts and are the only tribute to his memory that he would wish. He carried on his work as well as his failing strength would allow till the summer of 1940.

It was becoming increasingly evident that the zest had departed — or rather had been drained out of him by the exertions consequent upon the war and the subsequent evacuation difficulties. In 1940 he went to Farnborough and took a well deserved rest. He spent almost a year at this College doing as much as his strength would allow. At the end of the year it seemed that he was regaining his strength.

With the return of his vigour there returned the old eagerness to work. He was duly appointed Rector of the Salesian House at Burwash. This new sphere of activity and responsibility called up all his talents. His activity revived, his administrative faculties were in great demand, and he began once again to spend himself and be spent in the service of the Congregation. The confrères found that they had a superior who was as energetic as any of them, an example of work and piety that could not be bettered. He was sympathy itself and entered into their lives and difficulties with complete understanding. It seemed that a new lease of life had been given him, but it proved to be but the last effort of a gallant Salesian. His sensitive nature hid very real suffering. He would never allow that he was ill, he fought the disease that had attacked him in 1923. However the inroads made upon his strength by his recent efforts had been considerable, and proved to be too great for him to win the unequal fight.

In early December he had a slight stroke but even at this juncture he would not give up. No one could be certain that he had had a seizure. His resistance gradually weakened and in early January he had to take to his bed. He was at the end of his life — a young man worn out by the zeal of his labours. He bore with admirable and exemplary fortitude the inconveniences and pains of his last illness. He was ever worried that he was giving too much trouble to his Confrères. His one preoccupation was that no detriment should come to the school through his illness. He was far more interested in that than in his own serious state. He knew that the end was not far distant. He received the last Sacraments with great devotion and humbly commended his soul to God, and on the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes he was called to celebrate with Our Lady this beautiful feast. He had begun his Salesian life on the feast of The Immaculate Conception, he had been deeply devoted to Our Lady all his life, so it was fitting that he should be called by his Heavenly Mother to his eternal reward on the feast complementary to The Immaculate Conception.

The Salesian Congregation has suffered a heavy loss — this Province could ill afford such a loss. The memory of Father Hickey will endure as long as the Salesian name in England. His name will be held in honour and affection by thousands of Old Boys of the Colleges of East Hill, Farnborough, and Battersea. His example of unceasing labour will be ever an inspiration to the Confrères who mourn his loss.

Solemn Requiem Mass was sung in the Church of St. Joseph, at Burwash, on February 16th. Father Hickey was then laid to rest in the Salesian cemetery. He was a good Salesian. His eternal rest is commended to your prayers, and with it a prayer for an intention that Father Hickey had at heart all his life — the continued progress of this Province, for God's protection on our Houses in these difficult times, and for God's help in fitting this Province to meet the severe educational demands that will come upon it with the cessation of hostilities.

Yours very affectionately in C.J.,

F. V. COUCHE, S.C. (Provincial).

Data for the Necrology. — Father JOHN JOSEPH HICKEY, Priest, died February 11th, 1943, in the 54th year of his life, the 34th of his Religious Profession, and the 25th of his Priesthood.