

FATHER GEORGE HILTON SDB

Dear Confrères,

Father George Hilton died peacefully on Monday, 4th August, 1986 at the age of 82.

It was, perhaps, appropriate that he died on the feast of St. John Vianney as the ministry of reconciliation was one of his many apostolates. Only a few days before his death he assisted at a Penance Service for the Don Bosco Boys' Camp held in our grounds. He acted as confessor for many of the community and local clergy and was always ready to help out in neighbouring schools and parishes.

George Hilton was born in Blackburn, Lancashire, on the 25th of October 1903. His family played an active part in the life of the local parish so it was no surprise when George, aged nineteen and working as a cotton weaver, decided to try his vocation to the priesthood. His only concern was whether his parents would be able to manage without his support but they gave their blessing and he came to the school in Battersea as an aspirant in 1923. His first profession was at Cowley in September 1926. Like many others in those heroic days he combined a busy programme of teaching and assisting with his theological studies. He worked in Malta, Farnborough and Battersea and was ordained in Southwark Cathedral on 15th August, 1934. He remained on the Battersea school staff until September 1937 when he came to Blaisdon for the first time. The house chronicle records: 'We extend him a hearty welcome and wish him many years in Blaisdon'. At first it seemed that the wish was not to be fulfilled. When war came in 1939 Fr. Hilton volunteered as a chaplain for the army.

In these completely new surroundings Fr. Hilton's apostolic urge found many varied outlets. His musical and dramatic talents and his organising ability were given every opportunity to develop. He was able to help many different groups. For a while he was on loan as chaplain to the American forces stationed in this country and their commanding officer's letter when Fr. Hilton received a new posting bears eloquent testimony to the close relationships he had built. He spent some time in Belfast during the bombardment of that city and was able to give comfort and support to many families. Links formed at that time survived right to the end of his life. Towards the end of the war Fr. Hilton undertook the pastoral care of a number of prisoner-of-war camps. He discovered a number of German soldiers who had been studying for the priesthood before being conscripted into the army. He found books and lecturers for them and a small 'seminary in exile' developed. The high value set on his services as chaplain was shown by his being awarded the M.B.E.

Of the forty years that still remained of his life when he came out of the army in 1946, thirty were to be spent here in Blaisdon. Rather than chronicle his various brief stays in other communities it would seem better to comment on some of the many apostolates he found time, energy and inspiration to develop.

Father's association with our past pupils began during his first brief stay in Blaisdon and continued even during the years that he spent in other houses. This long established relationship really bore fruit during the last twenty years. Increasing numbers have confided in him and received help and advice. The family days, summer camps and annual re-unions have all flourished and Fr. Hilton was always at the centre of everything. The medal he received from the International Secretariate of Past Pupils on the occasion of his Golden Jubilee of ordination was something he particularly treasured.

After the war, Fr. Hilton spent a few years in Bolton. There he helped to organise active groups of Cooperators in neighbouring towns. This interest in the Salesian Cooperators continued and developed and from Blaisdon he distributed hundreds of bulletins, always enclosing with them his own much-valued personal letter. From this there grew a really wide-spread apostolate by correspondence and Fr. Hilton was able to help many communities at home and on the missions with the mass offerings he received and distributed. He also inspired a local group of 'Friends of Blaisdon' who assisted him in his various apostolates.

From the early nineteen sixties, Fr. Hilton began to take an interest in the spread of Salesian literature. He developed Salesian Publications and Filmstrips, arranged for translations and helped greatly the growth of visual aids in catechetics. He also helped in the provision of text books for our schools in this country and on the missions.

His war-time experience as a chaplain led to a continuing interest in the pastoral care of the armed forces. During his second period in Blaisdon, from 1952 to 1959, he became officiating chaplain at R.A.F. Innsworth and filled that role again from 1970 until his death. His kindness and good humour made many friends among the service-men and women and their families and he was always ready to exercise his priestly ministry on their behalf.

You don't have to look very far in the Blaisdon House Chronicle before coming across references to days of recollection or retreats given by Fr. Hilton to various groups. This is yet another example of a form of apostolate that he developed early in his priestly life and never relinquished. Of the few personal possessions he had, by far the biggest item is the collection of retreat and sermon notes stretching back over many years but constantly renewed and revised.

In what was to be his final letter to the Cooperators, distributed with the Salesian Bulletin just days before his death, Fr. Hilton passed on to them something that had impressed him in an Indian Salesian publication. It is called the Apostolate of Smiling and, as a practical expression of Don Bosco's motto 'Serve the Lord with gladness', I think it provides a unifying thread that runs through all Fr. Hilton's long life and many and varied activities. The message is simple. Learn to smile to yourself. Go out and radiate that smile to others. Count the number of smiles you receive in return.

The conclusion of the article sums up Fr. Hilton's firm belief.

"Smile at God in loving acceptance of whatever He sends into your life and you will merit to have the radiantly Smiling Face of Christ gaze on you with special love throughout Eternity."

Let that be our prayer for him.

Please ask God's continued blessing on our work here at Blaisdon.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Fr. George Robson S.D.B.
Rector

Date for Necrology:

Fr. GEORGE HILTON. Born 25/10/03 in Blackburn, England.
Died 4/8/86 in Gloucester, England, aged 82 years, in the 60th year of profession and 52nd of priesthood.