

My dear Confères,

It is with a heavy heart that I have to announce to you the death of

DAVID FRANCIS HOURIGAN, Priest

Aged 36

who was killed in action while carrying out his duties as a Military Chaplain in the Allied Forces.

David Hourigan was born of good and hard-working parents at Castletown, Pallaskenry, Co. Limerick, Eire, on July 12th, 1906. He soon grew to delight the hearts of his father and mother by his sturdy body and his sunny temperament. His was a very typical Irish character; devout and strong of faith, yet full of the innocent joy of life, brimming with ceaseless activity and irrepressible gaiety. Indeed, all his life David was the living disproof of the worldly contention that the good are of necessity gloomy kill-joys, for whom happiness exists only in the next world. David served the Lord in gladness, as he and all of us are bidden, and was assured of the special love of God for one who gives his gift with cheerfulness and a generous joy of heart. Gladly, in all truth, did he give to the Lord, offering his life's work in his earliest youth, renewing the sacrifice in entering the work of the Missions in the Far East, making finally, in the prime of his life, the supreme sacrifice of life itself on the field of battle.

Shortly after David's thirteenth birthday, the big house of "Copsewood" near his native village of Pallaskenry, was purchased by the Salesian Fathers who soon announced their intention of opening a College there for students of agriculture and for the training of boys as aspirants for the Society, with particular reference to missionary work. The College was in fact opened in December, 1919, and, about a month later, David Hourigan was entered on the books at the age of thirteen and a half. It is certain that in thus following his vocation this lively, athletic boy made a big sacrifice, certain that in his youthful eagerness to serve God he readily sacrificed in advance his adventurous desires, his longings to travel and to see the world and its peoples. But as so very often, God accepted the offering and then, in His own time, gave it back in royal abundance. For, in the comparatively short years of his religious life, David Hourigan was to travel and to see more of the world than perhaps any other member of even this far-flung Province, meeting incidentally such adventure and experiences that must have gone beyond even the early dreams of his boyish heart.

There were many outstanding boys in that first Aspirantate at Pallaskenry and many to-day occupy responsible positions in the Province. But even among such as these, David, in his own way, was conspicuous by his earnestness, his desire to learn, his eagerness to please, and perhaps more than all, by the charm of his engaging manner, which rapidly gained for him the friendship of Superiors and companions alike. His was a very definite personality, and it is not in the least surprising that the memory of him in his early schooldays is still fresh and clear in the minds of those who were his companions at Pallaskenry.

After two years, he entered the Novitiate House at Cowley, Oxford, receiving the clerical habit in the November of the same year, 1921. He made his first profession at the end of the Novitiate in 1922 and commenced his philosophical studies. It was characteristic of Brother David that he should have volunteered for the missions at the first opportunity; and certainly his young enthusiasm, his splendid physical condition and his confident ability to mix easily with all classes of persons when necessity demanded it, made him a good subject for missionary work. Accordingly, his application accepted, he left England for China in the Autumn of 1923, shortly after his seventeenth birthday, and arrived at Hong-Kong early in the following year.

It is possible that the life Brother David was to live there was not what he had imagined missionary life to be. In fact, he would find the Salesian Studentate at Hong-Kong very much the same as that of Cowley. The Society insists that the missionaries shall as far as possible undergo the same course of studies as they would have received at home; the missionary priesthood makes no less demands in its dignity and intellectual standard. Indeed, this is of extreme importance in a land where paganism is by no means synonymous with ignorance or lack of culture. But, certainly, the young missionary would have additional labours to those of his companions at home; he must study the language, customs and character of the people among whom he has come to work; he must learn to accustom himself to the strange food, to the vagaries of the climate, to gain experience in the manner of dealing with the inhabitants. All this Brother David did at a time when he was most fitted in mind and body to become completely acclimatised and completely at home in what he hoped would be the field of his future priestly labours. There is every evidence that he profited exceedingly from the wise provisions of the Superiors. He laboured hard and willingly at his studies and in his active life. It is said by those who are in a position to know that he became a master in the Chinese language, a feat of no mean determination and intellectual capability, in the face of which it is almost an anti-climax to say that he also learned to speak fluent Italian.

Apart from his studies, Brother David worked hard at the St. Louis Industrial School, the principal Salesian House in Hong-Kong. Here in this large institution, a veritable hive of Salesian and missionary activity, the young cleric found every scope for his enthusiasm and activity. Besides the large parish and the general work among both the European and the Asiatic population, the House itself contained elementary and technical schools of a high standard of efficiency, and these in addition to a flourishing Aspirantate and a crowded daily Festive Oratory. Brother David was chiefly concerned with the scholastic side of the work here, and soon after his priestly ordination, which great joy came to him in 1931, he became Prefect of Studies.

It is related that on one occasion Father Hourigan and a fellow Salesian were accosted and attacked by three impudent Chinese Communists. Since martyrdom is one thing and robbery with insult and violence quite another, the two Salesians accepted the challenge and returned the attack. Calling to his companion to take one of the three, Father Hourigan tackled the remaining two with such vigour that the tables were immediately turned and the three would-be assassins were glad to escape with their lives.

In the all too few years that he was to remain in China after his ordination, Father Hourigan was to prove himself a most successful member of the staff and a great asset to the House. His trilingual capabilities were now seen to their best advantage. The British authorities showed themselves to be actively interested in the work of the big Salesian School, and the young Irish priest, the only member of the Community from the Anglo-Irish Province, was quite naturally very much in the foreground in the relations of the House with the civil authorities. He made a deep impression on all with whom he had to deal. His calm assurance and disarming humour appealed to the Colonial officials, and it is true to say that Father Hourigan's personality assisted very greatly in giving the Salesian School the high standing it enjoyed in Hong-Kong at the time of his departure.

Father Hourigan had been eleven years all told in China when, in spite of his apparent strength, ill-health began to affect him and the doctors advised a return to Europe for a period of sick-leave. Accordingly, he arrived in England in 1934 and spent some time resting at Shrigley, where he made a somewhat slow recovery to complete health and strength. It was thought unwise to allow him to return to the Far East, as the Superiors were unwilling to risk a further period of ill-health; it was, therefore, decided to use Father Hourigan's capabilities for the time being in parochial work in some of the parishes attached to our Houses. Until the outbreak of war in 1939, he assisted with much success in the parishes of Cowley and Chertsey, after a short period at Farnborough.

At the commencement of hostilities, Father Hourigan was one of the first to apply for, and to receive permission to join the Forces in the capacity of an Army Chaplain. Much as he had endeared himself to the peoples of the parishes in which he had worked, the life of Chaplain offered an even wider field of activity than he had found in his parochial work. In many respects, Father Hourigan was the ideal Army Chaplain. His natural charm of manner, his wide interests, his physical ability to endure discomfort and fatigue to a degree that few could do better, these formed a ready entrance into the confidence of the men; and building on such natural foundations, he was able to discuss spiritual issues in a manner which commanded both interest and respect from his hearers.

It was no surprise to those who knew him that he rapidly became an efficient and popular Chaplain. In the stress of battle his calmness and refusal to be dismayed or downcast in whatever disasters might befall, his courage and his unfailing humour, in fine, all those qualities of mind and heart which were the envy of more gifted men, these were an inspiration to the men about him and were a living example of the true confidence and courage of heart which springs from a lively faith and trust in God. In his more personal dealings with his charges, his zeal, quick sympathy and genial kindness won him a widely expressed affection and esteem from officers and men alike.

Sent early to France, Father Hourigan was one of the great army who endured the harrowing experiences of the retreat to the beaches at Dunkirk. Here he did splendid work in his care for both body and soul of the wounded and the stricken. He was successfully evacuated, although he shared the common loss of all he possessed in France.

For the next two years he was employed on the various routine labours of a Chaplain in a slowly developing Army; but it was always understood that the first chance of action would be eagerly accepted. The chance came and Father Hourigan volunteered for the most arduous duty in modern warfare, that of the Paratroops — soldiers who are dropped by air into the heart of enemy territory. When the unit moved into training in the Middle East, their chaplain went with them.

Of this period of Father Hourigan's life little is known, shrouded as it was in the secrecy of impending operations. One sidelight that emerges is contained in a letter, written after Father Hourigan's death, from a Jewish Chaplain, who said that alone out of all the officers Father Hourigan treated him with friendliness and with many acts of co-operation and kindness, which had left an indelible impression upon his mind.

Out of the silence, the end came with startling suddenness. Father Hourigan's unit went over Sicily with the opening wave of invasion. Here his command of the Italian language was of great value and it is known that he kept right up with the most advanced troops, using his knowledge in the interests of humanity wherever it was possible to do so. He had been only three days in Sicily when death came, suddenly and in the silence of the night, in one of the British advanced posts some miles from the coast. It was the night of July 10th, two days before Father Hourigan's thirty-seventh birthday.

The Army Chaplain to whom fell the sad duty of burying our dear Confrère, wrote a letter at the time: ". . . And now he lies, in peace and at rest, far from the agony and strife of war, waiting for the glorious resurrection in a quiet corner overlooking the blue waters of the Mediterranean."

Tragic and unexpected as was his death and deep our grief, yet surely mingled with our sorrow there is a note of joy, a ray even of happiness in the thought of the noble manner in which this good Salesian priest met the call to eternity, the generous impulse which prompted him to sacrifice his life in the discharge of his priestly duties. In death as in life, his place was with his men, helping them, encouraging them. The Master awaited him, received him as the good and faithful servant in life and in death, who had not betrayed the trust that was given to him.

And while thus in pride and grief we honour the memory of this young soldier priest, let us not be outdone in generosity in the offering of our prayers and suffrages for the eternal repose of his soul. The Master came indeed "like a thief in the night" and called this soul suddenly to give an account of its stewardship. God grant that when our time comes, we too, may be able to look back on a life that has been a real encouragement to others, a life that has answered its purpose, a life that has been a power of good amongst our fellow-men. While praying for our dear Confrère, pray also of your charity for the many needs of this Province in the difficult days through which it is passing.

Yours devotedly in C.J.,
F. V. COUCHE, S.C.(Provincial).

Data for Necrology. — Father DAVID FRANCIS HOURIGAN, killed while a Military Chaplain in Sicily, July 10th, 1943, in the 37th year of his life, the 21st of his religious Profession and the 12th of Priesthood.