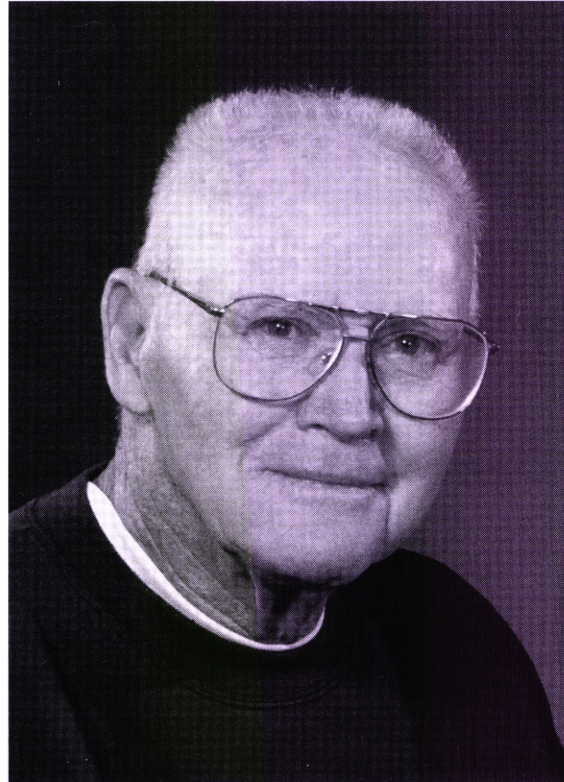




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Br. Thomas J. Keegan, S.D.B.



The world will always welcome us as long as all our concern is for the underdeveloped peoples, for poor children, for those members of society most in danger. This is our real wealth which no one will envy and no one will take from us.... When it happens that a Salesian yields up his life while working for souls, you can say that our Congregation has registered a great triumph and that on it will descend in abundance the blessings of heaven.

—From the spiritual testament of Don Bosco.

In a sense it was an insight into the morning that Br. Tom Keegan died. The young people gathered around his coffin bore tribute to the impact of a man who lived simply to be of service to those same young people. Brother Tom Keegan's life was simple and yet over 2000 people, mostly those he had coached, taught, and mentored, paid tribute to him with their presence at his viewing and funeral.

Brother Thomas J. Keegan was born in Linden, New Jersey, October 25, 1918. He was the youngest of three children, the eldest, Mary, and Larry still surviving. His brother, Larry, recounts his impressions of Tom from an older sibling's view: "My knowledge of Brother Tom came not from "hanging out" together but from many years under the same roof, where an individual's basic traits are under daily scrutiny. As an older and hectoring brother, I believe I was his earliest and most persistent affliction. It seemed necessary for me in those days to be assertive to the point of belligerence, to be 'in your face' in much of my social dealings. Tom would respond spiritedly to my bullying, defending himself the best he could despite almost a two-year disadvantage in physical development. Although the provocation was severe, he was never vindictive. The lack of vengeful rancor on his part would eventually shame me into

disengaging, at least temporarily. I envied him the grace of his personality. He appeared always to be at peace with himself, with others, and with his circumstances. At a much later day, having acquired some sense in the interim, I apologized for being 'such a rat' in those early years. Ever gracious, he smilingly dismissed the need for apologies."

After graduating from high school in 1937, Tom moved to Utah where in 1942 he was inducted into the Army Infantry. During World War II he participated in the second wave of the invasion of Normandy. He was a Staff Sergeant and Squad Leader and saw more action in Ardennes, Central Europe and in the Rhineland. He was decorated with the Bronze Star and Good Conduct Medal. These honors he kept quietly to himself, his family not even knowing until he returned to Europe for the 50th anniversary celebrations. Tom's own sense of honor to his country continued into school life. He was consistent in the raising and lowering of the flag.

Though a patriot, he was not fitted with military precision. Mary, his sister, remembers: "His disinterest in being the perfect soldier showed on the parade grounds, where his long stride often did not conform to the pattern desired by the drill instructor. On occasion this resulted in punishment; Tom would

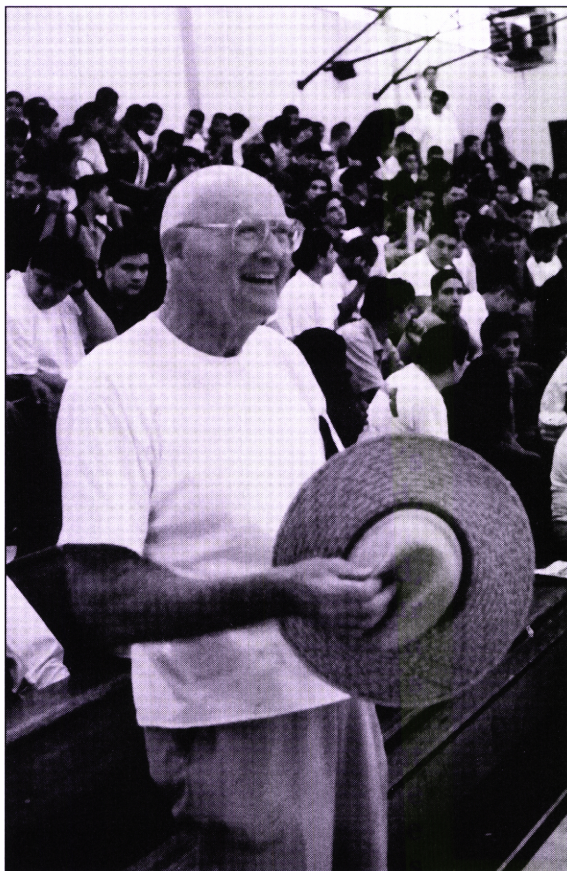
be relegated to KP (kitchen police) duty. To Tom, the punishment was a reward. 'Being on KP was the only time I ever got enough to eat in the Army.'"

His sister relates another story about an incident which happened during the war. "After D-Day plus some days, Tom's group had captured German soldiers, one of whom, Tom said, was over fifty and had a head wound which was bandaged. As they went forward the German POW's were taken along. When German fire started this particular POW dived into a hedgerow for protection and Tom's Lieutenant shot the wounded, unarmed POW but didn't kill him. Instead he turned to Tom and said, 'Keegan, finish him off.' 'Do your own dirty work,' replied Tom." An example of the nature of Tom's sense of honor and duty.

It was in September of 1946 that Tom made first contact with the Salesians. He was living in Salt Lake City working at Holy Cross Hospital and found material about the Salesians, leading him to contact the Salesians in the West. After a year in Watsonville as a Son of Mary, Tom completed his Novitiate in Newton, New Jersey, professing as a coadjutor brother on September 8, 1948.

His early Salesian years were spent as a worker at Don Bosco Technical High School in Paterson,

New Jersey, a cook at the Salesian Juniorate in Richmond, a handyman in Aptos and at Saint John Bosco



High School, Bellflower. He completed some preliminary studies in Paterson. Tom made his perpetual profession on September 8, 1954 in Watsonville where he served as an auto mechanic and baseball coach.

It was in 1958 that Bishop Mora Salesian High School, Los Angeles, opened its doors to the neighborhood community and Brother Tom

was to begin, in earnest, his second stint of service—not in the military, but in the ministry.

It is difficult to pinpoint the number of boys Brother Tom influenced. He taught Physical Education, Remedial Reading, Math, English, and even Musical Education. He moved beyond the boundaries of Salesian High School in his visits to the young people in the juvenile detention centers, for whom he prayed consistently at Mass. But, as anyone who knew Tom could tell you, his involvement with Cross Country and Track provided the richest ground for sowing the seed of the kingdom of God. It was not enough that his Cross Country teams took League and C.I.F. titles, but in the personal relationship of

coach/runner lay a deeper level of mentor and friend. Brother Tom used his daily practice to exhort the kids to always be prepared: for practice, the upcoming meet, in studies, for death. Listening to his kids, "Keegan's boys," there come reminders of not only training for the sports but also of the commitment of being a practicing Catholic.

How could this simple man affect so many? He was a "sign and bearer of God's love to the young." He joined the young in all their events. It was common to see Brother Tom at every event: he didn't restrict himself to just the sports he coached. A familiar figure on the sidelines, he would give words of encouragement and commentary at the same time. For him to be a coach was the best way to interact with the kids. To train them was to influence them.

If the young knew that Brother Tom loved them, they also knew of his sense of drive and, sometimes, single-mindedness. Again, we have an account from his sister which highlights not only his stubbornness but also his humility. "A day in the early eighties Josephine La Voice, Tom and I called on Dee and Bill Cascio, residents of Temple City. Our conversation shifted to politics. Very strongly stated points of view surfaced. Tom and Bill could be heard for miles. We



left before any blows were struck. A week or so later Tom went to the Bill Cascio home and rang the bell. Bill answered and opened the door. Tom thrust a bottle of wine at Bill. Bill automatically took the bottle. Tom turned on his heel and walked away. Not a word was spoken."

It is a tribute to his sense of drive to acknowledge that even when he ended his formal coaching career with his transfer to Saint John Bosco High School in 1981, he turned his efforts to preparing his classes. It was in the same year that he received his B.A. in History at Immaculate Heart College. He taught at Saint John Bosco until 1984, sharing his commitment to youth during his time in Bellflower. Members of the faculty and staff honored him by their attendance at the funeral.

It was to those in East Los Angeles that his heart belonged. He returned to Boyle Heights to help at the Boys' and Girls' Club on Wabash and to continue visiting the detention centers. As was his custom, he disregarded social convention to meet need. The social convention was the formal withdrawal of the Salesians from the administration of Salesian High School, the need to be met was the presence of the young people at the school. Brother Tom continued the Salesian presence by his Freshman Counseling, and later, when the Salesians returned, as

teacher of religion. In 1992 Brother Tom became Plant Manager at Salesian High School, making sure that the campus was clean for his boys. It was his personal touch that made his actions loving service.

Not only in the classroom, but he had the ability to relate to the young people during informal times. He encouraged the boys to "make another basket" in order to keep the campus clean and responded to the kids' "Who's #1?" with "ELAC!" (East Los Angeles College). It was widely known that any mention of Notre Dame University would immediately strike a cord with him and a conversation would follow.

A reflection from his brother Larry: "Might Brother Tom's dedication to his young charges have been brought about in part because of the lack of involvement by his father with him? Our father was a latecomer to marriage, resulting in the three of us being born when he was over fifty years of age (Mother was approximately twenty years his junior). Fashions of the time dictated against a father's being a confidant to his offspring. That view, compounded by Father's late begetting and the fact that he worked nights for many years, meant that he was a somewhat remote figure to us. As recently as my eightieth birthday celebration last January (1997), Brother Tom, sister Mary, and I found that our

memories matched: We remembered a hardworking father doing all he could to meet the material needs of his family but lacking the time, energy, and perhaps the know-how to provide attention and guidance." Just as Don Bosco's loss of his father influenced his need to be father and friend to the young, so too Tom's own history provided the necessary compassion and sensitivity for the young in his care.

It was his continuing presence at the school that colored his last day. On July 1, 1997, he was up early unlocking the gates and preparing for the chores of the morning. One of the students remembers seeing Brother Tom around 5:30 am. He must have returned to his room to rest, since he had had some trouble with his heart in recent months. It was while he was sitting in his chair that he suffered a stroke and a seizure, dying around 6:30 am. His body was discovered later that morning, since during the summer, it was common for Brother Tom to attend Mass at either Sta. Isabel or St. Mary churches depending on his plans for the day and therefore not be present for breakfast.

Brother Tom was 78 years old and would have celebrated his 49th year of profession in September. One archival letter has Fr. Gabriel Zavattaro, director of St. Francis School in 1947, writing to the Chancellor of the Military Chap-

laincy to ascertain Tom's marital status and character reference in order for Tom to enter the novitiate. The assistant Chancellor responds that Tom was unmarried and received an honorable discharge with a character rating of excellent, but whereas Tom's former chaplain could not remember him sufficiently, "we do not possess sufficient positive information about Thomas J. Keegan to pass a judgment as to his suitability for the religious life." Forty-nine years professed seem to be sufficiently positive a judgment.

Brother Tom's viewing and funeral were held on Sunday, July 6th in Salesian High School's Gym in order to accommodate the crowd. Viewing began at 3 pm and went until 7 pm. Throughout it all stood an honor guard of the Salesian Letterman Society. The funeral liturgy was presided over by Fr. Carmine Vairo, the Vice-Provincial, and the homilist was Fr. John Malloy, his director/principal at the beginning of Salesian High School. Several people gave tributes, including a telegram from the C.I.F. headquarters acknowledging his singular history as a coach. He is buried at the Salesian Cemetery in Richmond, California. Even at his burial, a bus of alumni, students, parents, and teachers traveled northward to give final honors to Brother Tom. Arms joined in mutual support, the young ones stayed at

the grave site until the last shovel full of earth covered his grave.

Mr. Villarreal, the principal of Salesian High School, spoke of Tom's belonging to all the young at Salesian and elsewhere. He was Don Bosco in our midst. At the end of his reflection he quoted a grave stone of a soldier killed in World War II which seems appropriate here. "To the world he was just a man, but to those who knew him, he was the world."

It is our hope to continue to carry the spirit of Brother Tom into the next hundred years of Salesian presence in the United States.

St. Paul's second letter to Timothy was used at his funeral and it serves as a fitting capstone to such a life: "I am already poured out like a libation, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith."

Brother Tom, we will miss you.

Fr. Chris Rosales, SDB
and the Salesian Family
of East Los Angeles



Br. Thomas J. Keegan, SDB

Born: Linden, New Jersey
October 25, 1918

First Profession: Newton, New Jersey
September 8, 1948

Perpetual Profession: Watsonville, CA
September 8, 1954

Died: Los Angeles, CA
July 1, 1997



Salesians of St. John Bosco

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