



Salesians of St. John Bosco



THORNLEIGH HOUSE
SHARPLES PARK
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February 1990

Dear Confrères,

With the death at the Alexian Brothers Nursing Home, Manchester of

REV. FATHER JOHN KELLY, S.D.B.

on the 12th February, the English Salesian province has lost one of its most distinguished and colourful characters. John was born in Pendleton, Salford on the 1st November 1900 and baptised at St. James' Church, Pendleton. He attended the local Elementary School from 1905-14 and from 1914-18 he worked as a labourer whilst also attending evening classes. From 1918-20 he was in the Army and he was able to attend the Advanced Army School lessons. From 1920-23 he was unable to get any regular employment apart from occasional casual work as a miner.

John had always been an active and interested Catholic and, after a local priest had casually asked him if he had ever considered becoming a priest, and soon afterwards meeting a young man who told him that he was going to try his vocation with the Salesians, John plucked up courage to go and talk to a Salesian priest. Towards the end of a seemingly successful interview, the priest casually asked John if he had ever been charged in a Police Court. The interview seemed to be coming to an abrupt and sad ending when John said "Yes" — but the tension eased when he explained that he had only offended against a bye-law in daring to kick a football in a public thoroughfare. He was found guilty and sentenced to a fine of 25 pence or five days in jail. John was accepted as an aspirant and he immediately began to prepare for his studies by trying to memorise Latin verbs and words during the time he spent in the pit and at home.

John began his Salesian life as an aspirant at Cowley, Oxford. He was then 23 years old and, after a successful year, he started his novitiate there in September 1924 and was professed a Salesian on the 13th September 1925. He then remained at Oxford for a year studying Philosophy, after which he went to the Salesian School at Chertsey for a year's practical training. At the end of the year he started the first of his many journeys abroad, this time to Cape Town as a part-time teacher and theological student. Fr. John was ordained in Cape Town on the 31st May 1931.

Fr. John remained in Cape Town until 1934, when he was asked to return to England to take on the role of bursar at Cowley, the house of studies. He also helped for a short time at a hostel for boys in London. In 1939 until 1946 he gained experience in parish work at Littlemore, Oxford and as Parish Priest at Burwash. Then in 1946 he began his missionary apostolate in the Falklands. He had been asked to take over from Fr. Hugh Drumm who had been acting as the priest-in-charge there for fourteen years.

Fr. John sailed out with the first group of islanders who were returning for the first time after the war. He had an appalling voyage, being sea-sick most of the time. When Fr. Drumm sailed with the returning ship, Fr. Kelly was left alone. There was no other priest nearer than the South American mainland, five hundred miles away. In a wild land of hardy sheep farmers, he was the sole shepherd of his Catholic flock scattered in various islands. He seems to have been completely unworried about his isolation and soon won the affections of his small congregation. Fr. Kelly returned from the Falklands in 1952 and went to Guernsey for two years doing parish work. In 1954 he returned to South Africa to work in the parishes of Cape Town and Lansdowne. In 1957 Fr. Kelly returned to London and then to New York, where he was based at the Salesian Provincial House, New Rochelle, N.Y. He stayed in America for two years doing Mission appeal sermons in parishes throughout America.

In 1959 Fr. Kelly returned to South Africa doing parish work in Cape Town and Manzini, Swaziland. His final and longest mission was acting as Parish priest on the islands of St. Helena and Ascension island from 1963-78. St. Helena had a population of about 4,500 with an Anglican bishop and two assistants. The Catholic church was over a 100 years old and had been built by the British garrison which had now left the island. Fr. Kelly was able to say Mass for about 20 parishioners, who regularly attended Mass on Sundays. The island had been without a regular chaplain for the previous 50 years.

Ascension island is about 780 miles from St. Helena. There were no permanent residents there — just people on short-term contracts with various international companies, connected with missile testing and communications. Fr. Kelly found that there were often about 300 Catholics, mainly Americans, on the island without a priest. He was soon able to set up two Mass centres; one was dedicated to St. John Bosco, the other to Mary, Help of Christians. Fr. Kelly kept in contact with both islands for about fifteen years.

In 1978 Fr. Kelly returned to the English Province in retirement at the age of 77. He went to live with the Salesian community at Bolton, not far from his birthplace. Eventually, as he needed more specialised care he was accepted by the Alexian Brothers at Moston. He was always quite happy there and, for a while, acted as the chaplain. Even when it was obvious that he had not long to live he was always ready to talk about his past experiences and to express his great gratitude to God for his Salesian vocation.

Our Lord tells us that "If a grain of wheat die it will reap a rich harvest." Let us pray then that in Fr. Kelly's death, God may plant afresh young shoots that will in time reap the same rich harvest that God gave to him in almost sixty years of priesthood. So, may his soul and the souls of all the faithful he laboured for, by God's mercy, rest in peace.

May God, our Father, through the intercession of Mary, Help of Christians and St. John Bosco, quickly grant him the reward of those who die in the Lord.

Michael Cunningham, S.D.B.

Necrology: Fr. John Kelly. Born on the 1st November 1900 in Salford, England. Died in Manchester on February 12th 1990, in the 89th year of his age, the 58th of sacred priesthood and the 64th year of religious profession as a Salesian.

R.I.P.