

Dear Confrères,

With the death, at Twyford Abbey Nursing Home, on the 27th October, 1975, of

**REV. FATHER DONALD CAMERON LEAVER, S.D.B.**

there was removed from the English Salesian scene one of the most distinguished and colourful characters in the whole history of the province, and one also of the best-loved and revered. Donald Leaver was, indeed, a quite extraordinary and gifted personality and, at the same time a splendid priest.

A Londoner by birth, he first saw the light of day on May 21st 1886 at Marylebone in the archdiocese of Westminster. He was baptised in the famous church of St James in Spanish Place, and was confirmed, in 1895, at the Redemptorist church of Our Lady at Clapham, not far from Battersea.

It was in that church that he first achieved fame. He was the possessor of a beautiful voice and, we are told, became renowned, first at Clapham and then in the Salesian church of the Sacred Heart at Battersea, as one of the star choir-boy singers of London. A companion in the choir at Clapham at that time was the late Mgr Canon John Byrne, who afterwards founded, and became the first headmaster of the St. John Fisher School at Purley, Surrey. From his lips, the present writer heard some of the stories of those days.

In October 1900, Donald joined the small Salesian school in Orbel Street, Battersea; the fore-runner of today's famous college. It was a school small in size and numbers, but with a true Salesian spirit and with a splendid staff, notable among whom was the late saintly Fr Juvenal Bonavia, S.D.B. It possessed, too, an air of happiness of which its pupils loved, in later years, to speak. In 1902, he entered the Salesian novitiate at Burwash, Sussex. There he received the religious habit and, on March 27th 1903, pronounced his first vows. His perpetual profession took place at Battersea on 20th October 1907. The years 1902-07 saw the completion of his philosophical studies and of the practical triennium at Burwash and Battersea. His intellectual ability was obviously already well recognised, for, during this time, he also gained his King's scholarship and matriculated. In addition, he taught in the parochial school at Trott Street, Battersea.

The year 1907 saw him leave for Italy. There, at Foglizzo in Piedmont, he did his course of theology. There, too, he managed to edit the English 'Salesian Bulletin', to teach English and to prepare for his doctorate of divinity. This he gained at Valsalice, Turin, where he again taught English until his ordination there on March 2nd 1912. For a few months in 1913, before returning to England, he was at Grand Bigard in Belgium.

His many talents were put to full use in the school, the choir, the stage and, let us not forget, in the pulpit and the confessional, first at Farnborough and then at Battersea from 1915-20. He was a much-appreciated teacher of the classics, whilst still always exercising to the full his other gifts. On the lighter side, one vividly recalls his humorous 'silly ditties' and recitations with which, in the refectory, he used to entertain Father Macey after breakfast. In the classroom, on the stage; in the choir and as a learned, humble and pleasant examiner in philosophy and theology, and again on the sports field, he was a master craftsman. A familiar sight at Battersea, especially during the regular Staff and School football matches on Saturday afternoons, was that of the 'Doc', as he was fondly known – though he disliked its use – racing down the wing at full speed, his slip cassock flying wide open and billowing in the breeze. He was as nimble with his feet as he was quick of brain, but always so self-effacing and shy; so humble and so full of fun. If, for instance, he was beaten on the football field, he accepted it with the happiest of laughs and with a hearty pat for his victor.

A most engaging characteristic of his, all his long life, was his fidelity in friendship and the really ardent and sincerely appreciative interest which he always manifested towards his former pupils and friends.

It was towards the end of 1918 or early 1919 that the strain on his nervous system became markedly in question. He was, at that time, teaching Latin, etc., in the Sixth at Battersea. And what a fine teacher he was! Then, quite suddenly, and to the dismay of the Sixth, he left that hall of learning for the lowest form in the school which was not much more than a kindergarten. There, he took up a sort of Montessori existence, teaching the simplest things in the happiest and simplest of ways. The technique was of a "What shall we do now?" character. If the youngsters chose drawing or singing, that was that. If they said 'sums', so be it. And if, as they sometimes did, they said "Let's go out and play" out he would go with them. With the kiddies he was as big and popular a success as he had been with the school-leavers and matriculation candidates. "A man for all seasons, and for all types and occasions, if you like, but certainly always a great religious, a genius and a gentleman.

In 1920, with the First World War ended, the first Salesian house in Ireland, that at Pallaskenry, Co. Limerick, was opened. The superiors in London, doubtless hoping that he would benefit from the new environment, sent him to Ireland.

There he took charge of the choir and of the musical side of the new school, and, from 1924-25, was also economer.

Another new school opened in 1925; Thornleigh Salesian College, Bolton, Lancs. Who better to be one of the Founding Fathers than Donald Leaver? So he crossed the Irish Sea once again and came back to England. He proved a tremendous asset to the new foundation and once more exercised the many gifts of which mention has already been made. 1928 saw him in Ireland once more, this time at Warrenstown in Co. Meath. Now, as his health had not recovered sufficiently to enable him to resume classroom activity, he devoted his life principally to the vocation of the confessional, although still performing his duty as a choir-master and organist. It was as a loved, trusted and well-equipped confessor that he devoted his remaining years which were mainly spent at, successively, Bolton, Shrigley, Bolton again, and Hastings.

Meantime, in 1943, a call for help came from the Salesians in Guernsey and there he went, busying himself particularly with convent supplies. He was very much at home, too, in the gardens he loved. There, too, his sister resided and, in later years, he went regularly from England each summer to spend a short holiday with her and with a retired priest of the diocese of Southwark who was a great friend. His Salesian confrères looked forward eagerly to those visits. They were delighted to see him and to hear him recount tales of years gone by, as well as bringing them the latest tit-bits from the mainland.

In 1949, he took up duty as chaplain to the Salesian Sisters at their hostel for girls at Sandrock Hall, Hastings, and he remained there giving splendid service till the end. Only the Sisters can describe the good he did and the zeal and priestly fidelity which he showed. We are told that, in addition to his work in the convent, he exercised a most happy influence on a number of people in the neighbourhood, and among those who sought his advice in matters both intellectual and spiritual, were certain clergy of other denominations. During these times, too, he won fame in another direction. The Catholic journal, the 'Tablet' ran a weekly chess column and competition for many years. Over and over again, the champion of Division I was none other than Father Leaver. Indeed he set some of the problems.

One side of his character has not yet been mentioned. It relates to his amazing contacts with the world of nature. He was a real Saint Francis and only those, and they are many, who have actually witnessed it could really believe his friendships with the birds. He spoke simply to them, making them almost human. He called them down from the trees by the names which he had given them, and such was his sweet discipline with them, that they fed happily from his hands. They followed him everywhere, waited for him as he went to and from his meals, and took turns to perch on him and share his joys with him.

One further word needs to be said about his musical talent. This was not restricted merely to his being a great singer and an accomplished instrumentalist. As was said earlier, Donald Leaver was always the master craftsman. What he did . . . and what a mountain of it there was! . . . he did thoroughly. Hence he made it his business to know the theory of music to perfection. Successive provincials have, we know, also made good use of his linguistic and other talents in the work of translation and other specialised tasks.

Perhaps on the happy note of his music, we may most pleasingly commend his soul to your good prayers. His life was a musical harmony at its best to all who knew him. May he now, with Our Lady and the saints, be enjoying the sounds of the angelic chorus in heaven. With great gratitude to God, he lived to celebrate the golden and diamond jubilees of his priesthood, and now he revels, please God, in the jubilee above. He was buried, with many marks of esteem from his confrères, at Cowley on the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, 11th February 1975. When shall this province see his like again?

Offer a prayer, too, please, for this part of the Salesian world which he so well adorned.

Yours very sincerely in Don Bosco,

*Bernard Higgins. S.D.B.*

Provincial.

**DATA FOR THE NECROLOGY:** Father Donald Cameron Leaver, S.D.B. born London 21.5.1886. Perp. professed 20.10.1907; ordained 2.3.1912. Died at Twyford Abbey, Perivale, Middlesex 27.10.1975 in the 90th year of his age, the 72nd of his religious profession, and the 64th of his sacred priesthood.

R.I.P.