

FR. LOUIS LIBERATI

August 15, 1988

Dear Confreres:

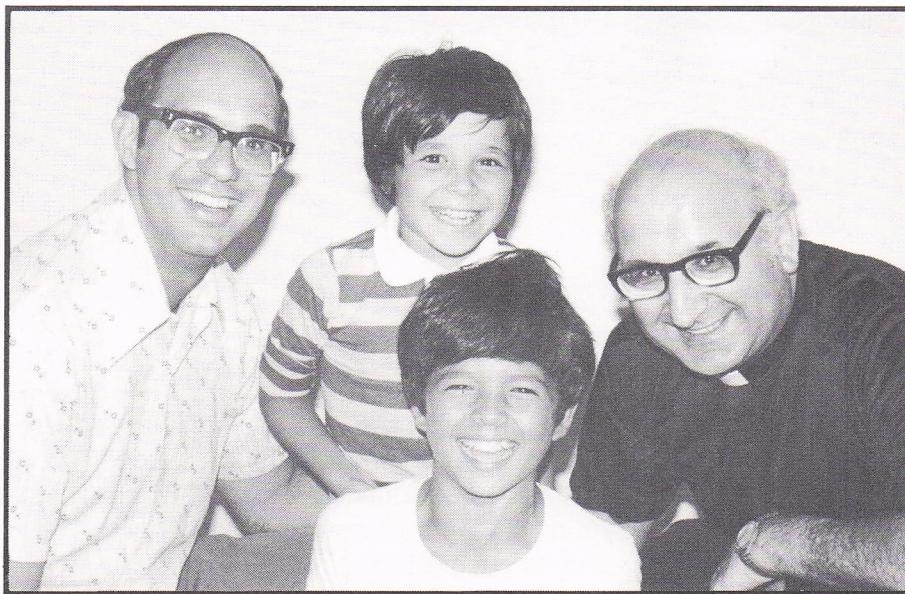
"Let the little children come to me!" (Luke 18:16)

Father Louis Liberati needed no encouragement to take this admonition seriously. Wherever he found himself, whether in Australia, Canada or the United States, Louis, like Don Bosco, found his joy in the midst of the boys and his Salesian confreres. How appropriate it is for us to see Louie's smiling face among young students on the YOUTH WORK poster produced by our Vocation Office. When it was time to put our best smile forward, there was no one else to look to but this gentle and humble man whose life revolved around the activities and mishaps of the boys he served.

When he died on February 4, 1984, Father Louie, as he was affectionately called, left a network of friends spanning his lifetime and continents. His final five years of struggle with Multiple Myeloma — bone cancer — deepened his already vital sense of prayer and gave further evidence of his serenity, patience, and well-known cheerfulness — qualities that took root many years before in his own loving family.

Louis, the son of Filomena and the late Luigi Liberati, was born in Chicago Heights, Illinois on December 15, 1930. He could often be heard to brag that his parents came from Le Marche as he continued to speak about his family with deep love and pride. His close-knit family moved to San Francisco where Louie grew up in the shadows of SS. Peter and Paul Church and came in contact with the Salesians. Having completed his studies at the parish school, Louie decided to move across the Bay to the Salesian House of Studies in Richmond in September of 1944. Breaking away from his family at the age of thirteen must have been difficult for Louie, his parents and sisters. In the seminary, Louie was an average student who was good at math but struggled with Latin and Italian which was different from the North Beach dialect of mixed English and fisherman Italian.

In 1948, Louie travelled to Newton, New Jersey, where he entered the Salesian Novitiate and made his first profession on September 8th of the following year. Life continued at Don Bosco College. Always a hard worker and one who loved sports, Louie maintained his gentle and easy-going manner. "He had a soothing way of calming fiery tempers and smoldering arguments with a gentle charm," attests his college companion, John Maxwell. "While most of us were critical, upset, wanting to change the world immediately, Louie showed us the way



of wisdom: the gentle word, the kind smile, the warm arm around the shoulder, the slap on the back." In 1952 Louie completed his philosophical studies and left Newton for his new assignment in Australia, then a part of the western Province.

During his three years in Australia, first at Sunbury and later at Brooklyn Park, he worked with the late Father Wallace Cornell who, in a letter offering condolences on Louie's death, made

these observations: "To me there were several aspects about Louis which made him such a lovable person and which made being his Rector an easy and pleasant task. First of all, there was his simple faith and simple approach to life. I think he learned this from his parents of whom he spoke often with real affection. Secondly, he was such a cheerful person. I do not think I ever saw him out of sorts. He bore no grudges if he had to be pulled up for anything (which was very seldom) and seemed to have the gift of lifting the spirits of those working with him. The boys he taught at the time have never forgotten him. Thirdly, he was such a generous person. He would stay on duty twenty-four hours if necessary. He was one of those rare people you are never afraid to approach to do that little extra job. He was an assistant of the highest quality."

Years later, Louie would speak of his Australian years with fond regard. He felt he had enjoyed the opportunity to come close to the boys as a cleric. Later it became more difficult when, as a priest, his administrative posts limited his time with the boys, yet they themselves never felt neglected by him.

In 1955, Louie returned to the United States to begin his theological studies at the Salesian College in Aptos, California, an undertaking which he took quite seriously. In his letter of application to the priesthood, he wrote, "I would never take this step without first placing my whole future in the hands of our Mother, Mary Help of Christians. With her help I do not hesitate to make this application, because she will make sure that I live as a true son of Don Bosco, unselfishly using my life for our Society and for Holy Mother Church." The application was accepted and he was ordained to the priesthood at the Church of Mary Help of Christians in Watsonville, California, on June 13, 1959. His aim, as many often heard, was to be "a simple priest and humble confessor." While his ministry certainly allowed that hope to blossom, he was also asked to take on many responsibilities.

In his twelve years at St. Mary's School in Edmonton, Canada, he taught almost every subject at one time or another and held every administrative post including that of Director-Principal. His exploits as a Bantam hockey coach are legendary. For many years, his teams almost owned the Knights of Columbus League trophy. His team made appearances in the city and provincial finals as well. When he tried to give up coaching for a season, he found it very difficult. He came out of retirement to coach the Bantam C team in his final year at St. Mary's.

His loyalty to the students, staff, and friends of St. Mary's would be hard to forget. Louie enjoyed living in the close family of the boarding school and was available to the boys especially in the non-structured and informal ways they could best appreciate. On one occasion, a former student now a "born again Christian," returned to visit and challenged Louie to show that he was living a "born again Christian life." Louie simply responded, "I am here for these boys every day." End of discussion!

When he completed his second term as Director at St. Mary's, he was given a year of study in Rome. The following year, he was assigned as Director of St. John Bosco High School in Bellflower, California. As at all his previous assignments, Louie came into close contact with

the young men who attended the school as well as with their families. While finding a well-ordered desk an impossibility and regular meetings a torture, Louie was throughout a master of the informal in his style of community animation and presence to the faculty and students. An opened office door with the sign, "I am lovable" attached to it was the sure sign of a friendly and cordial welcome to all who passed by. Before and after school, day-in-and-day-out, Louie could be found welcoming or bidding farewell to students and staff. After school he went out to the different practice fields where student athletes and their coaches awaited his daily encouraging presence. For the student, Salesian, or faculty member he encountered during the course of his day, there was always a friendly word. In the memorial tribute found in the 1984 edition of the school year book, the students wrote: "Father Louie served as Director from 1976 to 1982. During this time, Father Louie taught as Don Bosco himself would have taught; his gentleness and kindness set a tone for the entire school. Father Louie's door was always open and his warm, plant-and-souvenir filled office became the center of St. John Bosco High School. It is with many fond memories that we remember Father Louie and with a touch of sadness that he has left us, but it is with grateful thanks to God that He allowed Father Louie to touch our lives." It is no wonder that students and alumni drove during the night to San Francisco to bid their last farewell!

Louie made a deep impression on those he served in the weekend parish ministry as well. As one family wrote, "Thoughts of you always bring a smile to our faces. Although you don't know us personally, we remember you with the love and joy you have always radiated." Many people from the parishes he served sought him out for spiritual direction which he gently refused in order to be available for the Salesians and the school community.

Despite his desire to be the simple priest and humble confessor, Louie served a term on the Provincial Council and the Priests' Senate for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. For a person who found meetings painful, this was real service.

While Director of St. John Bosco, Louie was diagnosed as having bone cancer with five years to live. He accepted this cross with his characteristic faith in God and continued with his life placing it in God's hands. With many of his administrative roles assumed by others, he completed his second term as Director while undergoing chemotherapy every six weeks.

After leaving St. John Bosco, Louie was assigned to the Salesian Boys' Club in San Francisco's North Beach. Again his friendly Salesian presence was captivating both at the club and at the parish school. A year later, with the further advancement of the cancer, Louie moved to the Provincial House. His Director in that last year and half, Father Thomas Prendiville, later commented, "Louis was exemplary in his acceptance and tranquillity with suffering with inactivity. Without complaint, he never lost his sense of humor, his interest in what was happening in the Province. He wanted to help in any way he could, even though he was unable to move beyond the House. Louis speaks to us Salesians. The meaning of vocation, of priesthood, became clear throughout his life. In his own way, he modelled the priesthood of Christ as he saw it in St. John Bosco. He went beyond structures and positions and influenced people through his life."

On the feast of St. John Bosco, less than four days before his death, Louie offered Mass for the last time while seated in a wheelchair at St. Mary's Hospital Chapel. His Salesian brothers concelebrated Mass with him in the presence of his mother and sisters, Lillian and Louise. Severely weakened by the cancer, he died peacefully about noon on Saturday, February 4, 1984.

Funeral services were held at SS. Peter and Paul Church in San Francisco with the Vice Provincial, Father Thomas Prendiville, presiding and Father John Maxwell, Louie's companion from the seminary, giving the homily. Louie's earthly remains were buried in the Salesian Cemetery in Richmond.

At the news of his death, condolences came from the various parts of the world where Louie had served as a Salesian. Cardinal Timothy Manning of Los Angeles sent Louie's mother a telegram which bears quoting: "We join our hearts and our prayers with you and your family on the occasion of Father Louie's entry into eternal life. He was a good friend of many years. His dedicated priestly life brought many blessings upon the priests and people of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. We express our abiding gratitude to the home from which he came. He now receives that reward which the Lord gives to good and faithful servants. May he rest in peace."

With Cardinal Manning, we too are grateful for the years of friendship, abiding goodness, and apostolic zeal with which the Lord touched our lives in the person of Father Louis Liberati.

Sincerely yours in Don Bosco,

Rev. Richard Wanner
and the Salesian Community

Data for the Necrology:

FR. LOUIS LIBERATI

Born : December 15, 1930, Chicago Heights, Illinois
Professed: September 8, 1949, Newton, New Jersey
Ordained : June 13, 1959, Watsonville, California
Died : February 4, 1984, San Francisco, California

