



Marian Shrine  
Filors Lane  
West Haverstraw  
New York, 10993

Dear Confreres,

In the early hours of the morning of July 24, 1990--the traditional monthly commemoration of Mary Help of Christians--our brother and friend

FATHER JOHN LOMAGNO

peacefully returned to our Father's house. The booming voice, the sparkling eyes and the fatherly smile faded with the call of death, but all of us who knew him, that day, experienced with deep conviction that this good Salesian who spent his life enthusiastically proclaiming the glories of Mary had been rewarded his wish to die on a day dedicated to his "Mother".

Father John was born in Italy on the feast of the Holy Rosary, October 7, 1906. As a boy, his mother sent him to the Oratory at Valdocco so that his younger brother would not be alone. There he experienced the personal concern and interest of the Salesians and through their example, came to know and love Don Bosco. This love for Don Bosco took deep root in young John's heart and he made a decision to stay with Don Bosco for the rest of his life. As a young man of 19, the Salesians sent him to the United States. In 1926, he stepped ashore on Ellis Island, and later that year, began his novitiate in New Rochelle with the legendary Father Francis Binelli, as his novice master. On August 5, 1927, he made his first religious profession and then followed the usual pattern of Salesian formation: studentate, practical training and theological studies in Turin where he was ordained in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians on July 7, 1935.

On August 12, 1935, the newly ordained Fr. John left for America from Naples on the ship "Roma". Fr. John Divizia, his classmate, made the journey with him. The next morning, August 13, the ship anchored at Genoa where the two young priests met some companions who brought their trunks for them. After a short stop of two hours, the ship lifted anchor and Fr. Lomagno left his homeland never to return. He describes the emotions of that morning: "At 11 o'clock the siren blew, then followed the slow, sorrowful, heartrending departure from the last harbor of Italy, Adieu, friends: Adieu, Italy: Adieu, sacred land that keepest within thy bosom the blessed bones of my tender father! Adieu, loving region where I leave behind the persons I love dearest: mother and sister. Adieu, Italy of Don Bosco! Adieu, Italy of Mussolini! Adieu, Italy of the Vicar of Christ. In thee is the lighthouse of the Vatican City! To thee, oh Italy, I shall always turn my mind and heart for light and love!" The few pages of the Journal he kept of that journey reveal his love for his family, his concern for people and his poetic spirit.

August 20, 1935, the feast of St. Bernard and the name day of his brother he wrote: "I got up this



morning with a sudden attack upon me of nostalgic feelings. The sweet picture of mother, brother, sister are still lingering in my mind. O my God, bless them all! It is an avalanche of dear memories that are crushing my poor heart upon this dreary ocean. Four years in Italy, four years of blessings of all kinds. Blessings for my mind, blessings for my heart! It has also been a trying period! And now, today, the frequent occurrence in the Mass and in the Office of such a familiar name, Bernard, has revived a world of memories. Home sweet home, how many joyful hours I spent there, in a complete exchange of the truest affections.

Four poems could I write of the dearest names: mother, father, brother, sister! O my God, no earthly force could take me away from my dear ones!"

His poetic fancy is reflected: "On all looks is impressed the resignation to sail for five days without the refreshing sight of land; but more vividly still is impressed the anxious expectation of soon decrying familiar monstrous buildings, gigantic arrows pointed toward the starry firmament; the skyscrapers of New York." And of his concern for others, we read: "I begin to have a deeper insight of the life that is going on on shipboard: flagrant paganism and incipient nudism! But the God that receives everyday even eight or nine times a day from our ship the Divine Victim, has mercy on us and stops the anxious waters from swallowing us into its abysmal depths!"

On his return to the States, Fr. John took on various responsibilities, particularly in our houses of Formation, teaching philosophy and the classical languages. In 1941, he was appointed Director of Corpus Christi Parish in Port Chester, New York where he remained until 1945. Many parishioners there still remember him fondly. In 1945, he was appointed Director of our aspirants in Suffern, New York. The community remained there till 1947 when it was moved to the newly purchased property of West Haverstraw. From that time on, Fr. John's name has become synonymous with everyone and every activity at the Marian Shrine. He remained Director until 1953 and

then gave the rest of his years to the development of the Don Bosco Shrine which later grew into the present Marian Shrine with its various apostolic dimensions.

Always a great dreamer, who of us will ever forget Fr. John's exuberant talks and fantasy vision of "Boscoland" - "My dream was that one day a holy Coney Island would develop by the banks of the Hudson," he said. The dream, as he had it, did not materialize, but the Shrine became identified with his Salesian life and mission and through it he reached out to the thousands of pilgrims who came from near and far. The Golden Jubilee of his Ordination, his Director, Fr. Thomas Dunne, described him as the "Prophet of the Shrine" a title which he loved as he saw his dream incarnated, not in Boscoland, but in a Shrine which offered a unique way of reaching numerous people, to teach them and to foster in them love for the Holy Eucharist, for Mary Help of Christians and for Don Bosco himself.

Fr. John was a multi-faceted person with a sharp and penetrating intellect. Poetry never left his life. However, like so many poets, at times his dreams and visions were misunderstood. He suffered the frustration of never really bringing any of his many projects to completion - whether it was a book he would never complete, or his vision of Mary's Garden - with every flower that was somehow related to a title or image of the Blessed Mother. A theorist, he lacked the practical know how to bring his plans into action. In the last year or so of his life, he would often complain that he was a failure--never being able to accomplish so many of his dreams. Like many poets, at times he missed the value and depth of what he actually did. It is almost an impossible task to try to describe the giftedness of this great Salesian, but there are three areas in particular which I think his life leaves as an important legacy to our Province: his deeply human heart that enabled so many different kinds of people from so many different walks in life to find in him a real father and spiritual guide; a vibrant and penetrating love for Mary Help of Christians and her role in the history of salvation; and an active mind with a heart open to on-going formation, and a renewal of attitudes.



Fr. John will always be remembered as a man with a fatherly, warm heart. In a sermon which he wrote on July 7, 1985, the 50th anniversary of his Ordination, he said: "...we say God is human. He is a human being and if there is progress in this world, it is to learn how to be human beings! Even people that were very religious, once upon a time, were also very cruel! It is unbelievable to us to read about the good people of the Middle Ages and the Old Testament. Well, that is the great progress going on -- to learn how to be human..." He had a friendly smile and a warm embrace for everyone. The hallmarks of his humanness? His genuine smile, his bear-hug embraces and his witty-word, told anyone he met that here was a man fully alive and fully in love with people.

It was this warmth that attracted so many to be his spiritual children. The witnesses of his influence are myriad. One person writes him numerous letters all addressed to "My dearest Papa" A young couple who he counseled writes: "When God created the heavens and the earth, he saw that it was good. When God called you and He anointed you and made you His priest, we're certain He was delighted." Another couple, who had visited him just a month before he died writes to thank him: "The hours we spent with you were like the treasure found in a field the Gospel teaches us about." A beautifully powerful letter from a young woman who had not been to see him in more than two years: "I wanted to thank you for just now helping me thru one of the most difficult parts of my adult life. For the past few months I have been wretched spiritually and mentally...I remembered you talking to me about the spoiled children of God and realized that that is exactly what I have been!... How many people there must be that you've touched and helped! Our Father must be very proud of you." One good woman whom Father directed for nearly thirty years, wrote in 1987: "You have been a good spiritual Father to so many, but, I feel, you have been like the father I wanted and never had - for it's such a difference to be a worldly father, or a good spiritual Father like you. I thank God to have known you, and

have you as a friend from God to help me to not give up, for since knowing you -- I felt God never left me an orphan." A young Irish woman wrote to him in 1979: "You taught me so much about the Lord but the most important lesson I learned was my goal in life was to be a good person - a good wife and a good mother. I was very confused and had no direction, you were my light at the end of a dark tunnel. You touched me through Jesus' love and helped me on the road to becoming a whole person. You are a very special priest." On the day he died, one of his "spiritual children" wrote a moving letter to her "Pop" as she called Father John. In it, she explains why he was able to have such an influence on people. She writes: "How many times did you stop to ask, 'why do you love your old pop, so, so much?' and all I can say is, because --- you first loved me." That was Fr. John's secret. Whether it was the most ordinary person, or the first woman of the American stage, Miss Helen Hayes (whom he also directed for a while), Fr. John was the first to reach out in love, and his love and genuineness brought a response of love in return.

Perhaps one of the most touching signs of his simple humanness, was a reflection he wrote one morning as he realized he was losing some of his hair! He wrote:

Lord, do you know how many hairs are left on my scalp? This morning my comb was particularly covered. You are really incompatibly tender. O Father of Jesus and mine, I am grateful to your Son to have revealed this complete interest in and care for me - even my hairs!

No human sweethearts even went that far toward each other. At any rate, you heard me this morning as I was addressing the hairs stuck in my comb. Go, go, my little hairs. Go into the waste basket now. I have kept you close to me all this time; I have fed you and kept you alive. Go now. I will not perform any burial ceremony for you. But I feel you were a part of me every time people praised my rich crop of hairs. Yes, you were a part of me -- and the Lord cared for you too, the least part of me. Lord, I am so stupid to worry.



Still, about my hairs, Lord. This morning I almost had a burial ceremony as I cleaned my comb of the hairs stuck on it. I really told them all that I realized they had to go because they had performed their task you had assigned to them. This made me feel so close to you, Lord and Father. But I also felt the tender power of your love and care for all things, making all things sacred!

The wonder of it all is, Fr. John went to meet his Lord with a full, robust head of hair!

Truly Salesian, he was filled with that optimistic humanism that so characterized our patron, St. Francis de Sales. Years before his death he wrote: "All I have to be is truly human. But who is going to tell me what is truly human? Psychologists? Psychiatrists? Theologians? Who? And after I know, who will help me to develop toward that ideal? I know, Jesus - the absolute human, will tell me, will show me, will help me -- and Mary, too, the most perfect after Jesus, Her Son." Always filled with hope and optimism on the Golden Anniversary of his ordination he wrote:

When we have moments of great depression, frustration, what shall we say? Well, remember, you are branches of Christ! Tell it to yourself! How can I be totally unhappy and not have a certain amount of hope, in spite of all my biochemistry or what is going on in my nervous system? I can still hold onto something that will never be taken from me! And I can actually say with St. Paul, "Neither death, nor life, nor the sword, nor persecution, nothing can take away from me the love that is in Jesus"

Throughout the Province and for all who knew him, Fr. John's name will always be identified with the name of "Mary". Although very child-like in his personal love and devotion (his favorite title for her was "mamma" - and, how often, he would meditate, reflect, and work in his room, holding a chipped plaster statue of her close to his heart), his Marian

piety was rooted in solid doctrine and theological reflection. It was a devotion that called for imitation of Mary's virtues in everyday life more than veneration that is satisfied with keeping Mary on the periphery of Christian life.

He loved to quote over and over again our Rector Major, Don Vigano, regarding Marian renewal and the renewal of the Congregation. Fr. Vigano wrote: "I confess my intimate conviction, which becomes clearer and deeper, that without such a revival (in Marian renewal) nothing much will result from all our other works." Fr. John insisted on this in season and out of season. As he and I waited in the hallways of Good Samaritan hospital just three days before he died, this was his biggest pre-occupation: "tell the Provincial the reason why the province isn't renewed is because we haven't as yet had this true Marian renewal which the Rector Major speaks about...Be sure to tell him."

Fr. John also believed that this Marian renewal in the province was the special mission of the Shrine here in West Haverstraw. He never tired of reminding the community of the Marian dimension of our work. Indeed, among his personal notes we find the following: "Devotion to Mary Help of Christians as the Marian Shrine promotes it is not to be found in books--but in the heart and spirituality of Don Bosco. This is the great discovery of the Salesian renewal that has been going on all over the world in the Salesian Family--this is, especially in the teachings of Fr. Vigano, the seventh successor of Don Bosco. Don Bosco has been formed by the Holy Spirit through Mary as the living model of devotion to her as the Help of Christians. For him, Mary Help of Christians and love for her, was always a matter of the heart."



Perhaps, Fr. John best sums-up his feelings and thoughts towards Our Lady in a letter which he wrote to her :

Dear Mother,

I am spending my time mostly thinking of you, writing about you, talking and preaching about you. Of late, I started to have a feeling of uneasiness, even hypocrisy, about all this, especially about writing of you.

First, where do I get the material about you, your perfections, your personal attitudes toward us, etc. I get it from others. But did I truly assimilate it under the influence of the Spirit so that now I give what is my own? I hope so and I feel so. If there is anything to correct, please do so, dear Mother, I do not want to be a panasonic recorder.

What I would desire is this - to speak about you because you revealed yourself to me; because you took me into your Immaculate Heart and let me speak from there - or the Holy Spirit did.

I know I am most unworthy of that, but if I were to say only those things I am worthy to say about you actually I could never utter a single word. I am resigned to this, and don't fret and worry anymore. But since I am allowed to do so much for you, to say so many things about you, though unworthy, why not give me a chance to do more, to know more, to speak more convincingly, to reveal more secrets of your love. It's always the same thing - love and generosity on your part. But your children, your people would benefit, would know you better and love you more. Do it for their sake. But also for me, because you are my mother. Let me enter your heart and speak and write from there! And pray with you there!

Father John lived his life in the heart of Mary Help of Christians!

Our 23rd General Chapter has emphasized the absolute need for on-going formation if we are to effectively journey with the young of today. Once again, Fr. John seemed to instinctively realize how important on-going formation was. It can truly be said that he never allowed his mind and heart and attitudes to grow stale or old. People may not have always agreed with what he said or how he said it -- but all would agree that he was well read and up on much of the latest in theological reflection.

In the last two years of his life, during which I was privileged to live with him, I would marvel at Father John -- 83 years young with a youthful vision and a mind sharp and curious wanting to know and study everything new. He was not a prophet of doom who lamented the passing of the "good old days". He believed those days were good, but they were also gone, and he lived for the present. There are few priests whom I have heard, young or old, who quote Vatican II more than Fr. John did. He was interested in everything that had to do with bringing about the "New Pentecost" of John XXIII. He studied. He read. He reflected. He wrote. He discussed. He argued. He taught. He wanted to learn.

During these last few years, Fr. John was practically blind. This was probably one of the heaviest crosses he had to carry; he could no longer read. He refused to let that stop him! He had many friends who would come to read to him or put things on tape. He had read and studied and could quote all of the latest encyclicals of Pope John Paul II. He wanted to make sure that this teaching was known. In his homilies (known for their enthusiasm, vibrance and length!) and talks he was forever quoting the Council, papal encyclicals and the latest theological writings he could find. He often complained that so much preaching often fed congregations, insipid pious platitudes when what the people of the new Pentecost needed was solid doctrine based on solid theological reflection so that they could meet the challenges of the modern world. His eyes truly sparkled when he could get involved in some theological debate. He



pleaded with me to have community meetings where we could study and discuss the latest encyclicals of the Holy Father or the most recent Marian theological studies. At times, his continual insistence on these points and the need to study and read and reflect and discuss more, would get on people's nerves. However, I would be awed at the alertness of his mind and his sharp memory. He was really a man concerned with his personal on-going formation. At a time when our recent General Chapter asks that on-going formation find its place in the daily life of the local community, Fr. John's enthusiasm, at the age of 83, offers all of us a tremendous witness.

One year ago in February, Fr. John was with the community of West Haverstraw for his last celebration of our "Community Day". As could be expected, he wrote a song for the occasion (to the tune of On Top of Old Smokey - what else?!). I want to quote just a few of the many stanzas of the last song he composed -- a song which I think expresses some of his enthusiasm, optimism and youthful spirit.

United together  
In work and in prayer  
Don Bosco's ideal  
We're striving to share

To share with each other  
To share with the world  
For God's Holy Spirit  
Now wants it unfurled

The first centenary  
Since Don Bosco died  
With great celebrations  
His dream has revived

And the celebration  
Must kindle anew  
The flame of vocation  
within me and you

The flame of vocation  
To be and to do  
But first in devotion  
Be Mary's own Crew

At the close of our annual retreats here at West Haverstraw, we'll no longer hear his witty compositions to the tune of On Top of Old Smokey!! We'll miss his bombastic voice and inquiring mind. Old friends won't experience his warm hugs and gentle smile. Our province has lost someone special and his physical absence is certainly noted by all who come to the Marian Shrine. However, Fr. John's continuing presence is also felt. It is especially felt each day as the pilgrims sing his favorite hymn which he loved to lead and bellow out:

"He is Lord. He is Lord. He is Risen from the dead and He is Lord. Every knee should bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

Fr. John now enjoys the presence of his Lord, face to face, as he lives in the knowledge of his own resurrection. As we pray for this good confrere who loved Jesus and His Mother so dearly, please pray for this Salesian community and the larger community of pilgrims who frequent the Marian Shrine and who miss their good friend and brother. May he rest in peace!

Fraternally in Don Bosco,

Fr. Patrick Angelucci, SDB  
Director

Data for Necrology: Father John Lomagno, born October 7, 1906 in Italy, died at West Haverstraw, New York, U.S.A., July 24, 1990 at the age of 83, after 63 years of religious profession and 55 years of priesthood.