

St Patrick's Salesian School - Sliema, Malta

10 th April, 1992

Dear Confreres,

It was Tuesday, 10th March, 1992, late in the evening when our Bursar, Fr Tony Caruana entered the school parlour to close the windows when most unexpectedly he found :

Fr Anton Camilleri S.D.B.

sitting down in one of the armchairs, lifeless. For sure it was a big shock for Fr Tony for we never thought that Fr Anton could die so suddenly. He was returning from his usual evening walk and most probably he felt ill when he returned to base at about 7.00 p.m. My niece Roberta, a 7 year old girl, met him and even talked to him but he never asked for help. He died quietly and suddenly a few minutes later. He died as he had lived.

Fr Anton is sadly missed by all the Salesians and Boys of St Patrick's. Many others miss him a lot as well, for he was always available to hear their confessions and give some good advice in his simple and charming way. In the four years that he had been back in Malta, Fr Anton managed to make so many friends. This was evident at the funeral held in St Patrick's school chapel on Thursday, 12th March. The church was packed to capacity. What struck me most was the number of students who attended. Four schools were represented: St Patrick's, Savio College, and girls from St. Catherine's High School and the Girls Secondary School in Sliema.

Fr Anton in such a short time became a friend in confessions to a good number of students who certainly miss not just a confessor but a friend. For Fr Anton had a fantastic way of making you feel at ease; no wonder he will be missed by so many.

Fr Anton Camilleri was born at Lija on 27th November 1913. At the age of 12, encouraged by his Parish Priest, Mgr. Anton Buhagiar to follow Christ in the Priestly life as a Salesian, he came to Sliema as a boarder at St Alphonsus School where he studied for two years. Then he moved to Sicily to continue his studies for another 5 years before entering the Novitiate at San Gregorio in Catania in 1933. On September 14th 1934, he made his first profession to a life which he endured and persevered in, to the end - a life in which he was so exemplary and faithful. For his Tirocinium, Brother Anton taught at Marsala and Modica. By this time, 1939, the World was in turmoil... War broke out and in 1940, Bro. Anton, being Maltese and a British subject, found himself under house arrest at Modica. But nothing was going to hold him from continuing his studies for the priesthood. Without informing the Italian Police he left for the North - to Bollengo. Travelling in those days was hard and the war made it even harder. But Divine Providence looked after the young cleric and at Bollengo he joined a good number of Salesian clerics who were virtually in the same boat as he was - all foreigners in a country at war with the rest of the world except for Germany. The type of adventures that Cleric Anton and his fellow Salesians were to undergo would surely make a good war film. There were times of great tension and danger but all is well that ends well. At last in July 1944, Fr Anton was ordained a Priest.

For this great occasion it was not possible for any relatives to attend the solemn ceremony except for his cousin, Don Nazzareno Camilleri - another great Maltese Salesian whom many still remember for his intelligence and sanctity.

On the 16th December 1945 - now the war was over - Fr Anton managed to find his way back to Malta on a British Royal Navy frigate. For Fr Anton, December 1945, was a special month in his life; he accomplished what he had not managed to do during the war - he solemnly celebrated the great gift God had given him in becoming a Minister of God.

Fr Anton stayed in Malta for the next 13 years working for two and a half years in the Parish of Lija and then for the rest of that time in St Patrick's, the Oratory in Sliema and then for some time at the Don Bosco Oratory in Gozo.

On the 16th January 1958, Don Anton returned to Sicily and for over 30 years he gave his whole hearted service to the people of Riesi - a town of about 25000 souls right in the centre of Sicily.

In the early 40s, Riesi was considered by the Holy See as Mission Territory. There was a lot of work to be done. It was not just the lack of priests to look after the faithful but the great influence of Protestant movements and the infamous Mafia that made it very hard at first to penetrate the hearts of these good people. But as we all know the Salesian way is a way through the heart, winning hearts through love and sincere friendship; and soon he started to change the whole environment. Fr Anton played a big part in helping these people to become good Christians and honest citizens. Fr Anton through his simple and friendly approach became not just their Parish Priest (in 1962) but also their friend.

I was very impressed when last summer, Fr Anton returned to Riesi for a short holiday and I accompanied him on my ever first visit to Sicily. The welcome the townfolk gave Don Anton was something which struck me and left a very deep impression on me of what Don Anton meant to them. As soon as the word got round that Don Anton was back, the whole town gave him a rousing welcome from wherever he passed. The bells of his old parish, San Giuseppe, rang out to announce his arrival. The boys and girls of the town flocked round him to express their joy at seeing their spiritual father back among them. The Salesian Community of Riesi made him and myself really welcome and for those ten days we were treated as very special guests.

Don Antonio left Riesi in the Summer of 1988 but he left his heart there. How many letters he received from the many good people he had comforted and helped so much! How many families he helped to form into good Christian families! And now the formation he had given them is being passed to a new generation. The times Don Antonio spent in Riesi were hard times but during those years it certainly gave him great satisfaction to see so many people coming back to the Church. There was a time when he had to find funds to repair the roof of his parish church which had caved in. I still remember him during that time collecting money from the faithful in Malta and Sicily in order to restore to full use the church, he as Parish Priest so much loved.

Fr Anton has now passed to a better life, and as a faithful servant in the Lord's vineyard, one hopes that he is already enjoying the fruit of his labour. From the many comments and statements made after his death, Don Anton has certainly left an indelible mark on many people and although he will not be available to hear confessions and give his fatherly advice any more, many will surely remember his words, simple yet so wise, and endeavour to follow them so that one day they may join him in heaven.

Please remember him in your charitable prayers.

Alfred Sacco sdb
Rector

For the Necrology

Father Anthony Camilleri SDB born in Hal Lija, Malta, 27th November 1913; died at St Patrick's School, Sliema, Malta, 10th March 1992; in the 58th year of his religious profession and 48th year of his priesthood. Aged 79 years