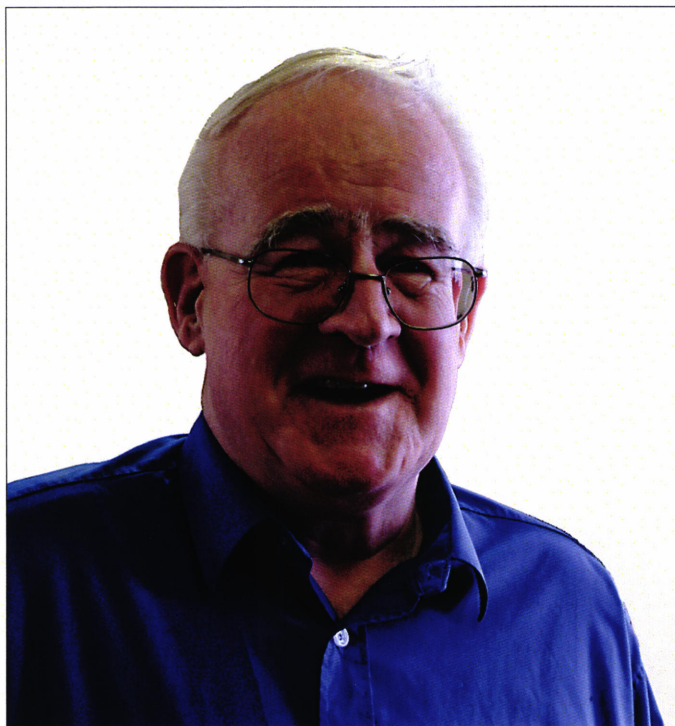




**F**r Peter Coffey had been in good spirits at lunch with the community on Monday 18 May 2015. Next morning he was found dead in his room in Salesian House, Crumlin, Dublin 12. His sudden death was a blow and a surprise that left his family, Salesian confreres, the parishioners of St Agnes', Crumlin, and his wide circle of friends reeling. There was a great outpouring of affection amidst the shock and sorrow, the grief and tears genuinely felt for the loss of a good man, a gentle man, a man whose cheerfulness lifted spirits and drew friendship in return.

Mary Duffy, a parishioner of Crumlin, phoned her condolences to the community commenting, "He's lovely. I loved him. Whenever he said a few words at Mass, they didn't come from a book but straight from his heart. There's another saint now in the Salesians!"

#### HOME TOWN

Hailing from Curragh, Geashill, Co. Offaly, Peter was second in a family of one sister, Rita, and two brothers, Seán and Joe. His parents John and Dina (née Callaghan) had Peter baptised on 16 April 1939 in the Church of Raheen three days after he was born.

Of good health as a child, he passed his primary schooling in his home town. His brother Seán said of Peter that "he lived life to the full, and did well anything he put his hand to. He was great at laying and picking spuds, on the bog, saving hay, and was a lovely footballer. But he wasn't into golf!" Seán related how in school, the master used light a fire in the classroom, and to get it started he would use some petrol from a can in the room. On one occasion, when Peter was asked to get the fire going, he threw the whole can of petrol on the fire and set off a huge blaze behind the master!

## **DON BOSCO**

Spurred on by Mrs Guinan, a sponsor of Salesian vocations, to follow his inclination to being a priest, at the age of 13 he came to know Don Bosco intimately after entering the Salesian College in Pallaskenry, Co. Limerick, in 1952. Peter himself recalled how each feast of Don Bosco, the students in Pallaskenry watched the old black and white film of Don Bosco and never grew tired of it. In fact, Peter had a prolific memory and in poetic tones could recite word for word passages from the film to perfection, including the final scene in which "the solemn tolling of the death knell changes to joyous tones as the bells of St Peter's in Rome ring out on Easter Sunday 1934" (or words to that effect!), the day Pius XI declared Don Bosco a canonised Saint. There were many episodes from that life of Don Bosco that Peter could recount, much to the surprise and enjoyment of his fellow Salesians.

Peter was most likely the first Offaly man to become a Salesian of Don Bosco when in August of 1957 he entered the novitiate of St Joseph's in Burwash, Sussex, as there was no Salesian novitiate in Ireland in those years. His novice master was the renowned Fr James Simonetti, who held what could well be an entry in the Guinness Book of Records — novice master for 54 years, truly a Church record!

Peter made his first profession at the end of that spiritual year and from that day on, in his heart he was a Salesian. In fact, on one occasion, when asked would he like to be buried at home with his parents, his answer was he preferred to be buried with the Salesians. And for this he chose the community cemetery in Warrenstown.

## **LEARNING HIS TRADE**

As a newly professed son of Don Bosco, Peter headed from Burwash to Beckford, Tewkesbury (Glos.) where he pursued GCE 'A' levels in English and History while doing the required philosophical studies as well. His journey then took him in 1961 to Hong Kong where he did his practical training and made his final vows as a Salesian. He did his theology in Bollengo (Italy) 1964-68, and there were many funny episodes in those four years. Fond of a glass of wine, Peter and fellow student of theology Noel Burke were experts at steering the Brother in charge of the wine cellar into a certain position with Noel engaging the brother in conversation while Peter slipped in behind him into the cellar to promptly emerge with a bottle in each pocket of his cassock!



### Ordination Day, Warrenstown, 29 June 1968

(From left) Fr Michael McKenna, Fr Michael Smyth, Fr Peter Coffey,  
Bishop John McCormack, Fr Dessie Riordan, Fr Joe Harrington.

At times during the afternoon *siesta* in the common dormitory which housed about 80 clerics in cubicles only separated from each other by a linen curtain (a bit like hospital beds), Peter would suddenly break out into English, in a very Michael O'Hehir voice, with a running commentary on an imaginary hurling match in which the first to break away from the throw-in was Galway, ending with a GOAL being smashed into the net! *Piano!* (Italian for *quiet!*) would be the irritated reaction from many cubicles, much to the glee of the English-speaking clerics. As Peter was so fond of saying, "Oh! Don't be talkin'!"

Peter reached his own big goal when, along with Joe Harrington, Michael Smyth, Dessie Riordan and Michael McKenna, he was ordained in Warrenstown College chapel on 29 June 1968 by the late Bishop John McCormack of Meath who had been appointed on 29 January and consecrated on 10 March that same year.

Shortly after his priestly ordination, Peter returned to Hong Kong. On hearing news of Fr Peter's death, Fr Lanfranco Fedrigotti (Provincial, China) wrote: *Here in Hong Kong and Macau Fr Peter is still fondly remembered by his many old boys, especially in Tang King Po School, where he served both as a Salesian practical trainee and as a newly ordained Salesian*

*priest, and in Macau's Yuet Wah College, where Fr Peter was part of a dedicated team that saved the school from collapse. The innovating teaching methods of Fr Peter and his practice of Don Bosco's Preventive System were very much appreciated.*

## **ONCE AGAIN ON NATIVE SOIL**

In 1979, Peter returned to the Dublin Province. After a Renewal Course in Theology in St Patrick's College, Maynooth, he fulfilled the role of Bursar, first in what was then the Salesian College, Ballinakill, Co. Laois and then in Warrenstown. During that period he directed the building of the school gym in Ballinakill, a work that reflected his large-hearted vision.

In 1984 Peter moved back to Maynooth and was appointed chaplain to St Laurence's Industrial School, Finglas. He worked there from 1984 to 1991, one of the happiest periods of his life spent with young people who had been sorely disadvantaged and who were being looked after by the De La Salle Brothers. In 1990 Peter joined the Warrenstown community while continuing to commute to his work in Finglas. Staff who worked in St Laurence's spoke with great affection of Peter and how many a time he would take a group of difficult boys off their hands and charm the lads with his laid-back approach, much to everybody's satisfaction. The lads even told Peter that if he ever needed a watch, they could quite easily pick up one for him!

After a Sabbatical year (1991-92) of leadership training at the Institute of St Anselm in Kent, Peter became chaplain to the Warrenstown Agricultural and Horticultural College until 2001.

He enjoyed parish work in Donney, California for one year. He recounted with a twinkle in his eye how during a meal with friends, one lady asked him, "Father, do you have computers in Ireland?" Peter's mischievous reply was, "Yes, we have six in Ireland, and one of them is in Dublin!" Peter himself never got into computers; he preferred an electric typewriter with a daisy wheel and typed all his notes for homilies in block capitals.

In 2002 Peter was appointed curate, and eventually co-parish priest in St Agnes' Church, Crumlin, and over the next number of years endeared himself to parishioners by his friendliness, cheerful spirit and pastoral care. During that time he underwent open heart surgery and hip replacement operations. He never fully recovered his earlier condition. He retired to Crumlin House in 2013.

## **SUPPORTIVE**

So many people bore testimony to Peter's kindness, people who experienced the death of a parent or family member, and whom Peter visited and to whom he proved a great support in their bereavement. Like the woman in the crowd who was cured through reaching out to touch to Lord from behind, Peter's cheerful presence brought comfort and consolation. The same was true of couples who had the fondest memories of his having presided at their wedding. As Monsignor John Deasy mentioned on the night of



### Missionary Days in Hong Kong

Fr Peter is in the back row, second from the right.

the removal of Peter's remains to St Agnes' Church, Peter didn't pay flying visits, in and out. He liked to sit and chat and his company was always jovial and uplifting. Nor did he like meetings, but he loved the socialising after them!

For Peter, joy was important. To make the point he told the story by Anthony De Mello of the pupil who goes to the Master, his spiritual guide, and says: "Master, I have an important spiritual question to ask: "Is there a life after death?" and the Master replies: "Ah, that is an important question, but it is not the greatest of the spiritual questions. The greatest of the spiritual questions is this: 'Is there a life before death?' "

Peter's comment was that so many go through life with hearts that are empty, empty of joy. They are devoid of joy and you can see this reflected in their faces. He quoted Pope Francis who stressed in *Evangelii Gaudium* the need to rediscover Christian joy, which is the fruit of the Spirit, and his saying there are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter! And for Peter love is where joy originates. One of the people who had most impressed him was Cardinal Basil Hume. In a TV interview with David Frost, the Cardinal was asked, "And now, Cardinal, before you go, I want to ask you one final question: "Of all the truths in the Catholic faith, which one do you find the hardest to accept?" The Cardinal paused for a moment, then said, "The truth I find the hardest to accept is that God loves me".

## MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Peter was a great preacher. Amongst other things, he used a small booklet called *My Day by Day* to prepare for daily Mass. In the last booklet he used, for May 2015, he had written for 1st May, the feast of St Joseph the Worker, in his own inimitable handwriting: *St Joseph is my favourite Saint. When confronted with bewildering circumstances he still believed that God was working mysteriously in all of this. He couldn't make sense of it until God gave Joseph his own annunciation.* Peter's faith was like that – that his life was in God's hands.

Further on, on 6 May, feast of St Dominic Savio, he wrote: *We need to draw from the vine, and we draw from the vine when we take time to pray. And when we rest in his presence we are able to hear his word and reflect on his word. When we reflect on his word, we are resting in his presence.* Peter was a man of prayer, who knew how to relax in God's presence. One of my lasting memories of Peter will be of him sitting for a few minutes in the community room in Crumlin House before Evening Prayer, obviously relaxing in the presence of the Lord.

He was also a man of heart. For Trinity Sunday, he wrote: *We can never get our **minds** round the Trinity. We don't have to do this. We are asked to get our **hearts** round it and immerse ourselves in it.*

Above all, Peter was a man of joy and cheerfulness. He loved the story of the priest going down the aisles in church on Easter morning, blessing the people with Easter water, before Mass. There were many long sad faces. When he got back to the altar, the priest paused for a few moments, then addressed the congregation: *I just want to say that it is Easter Sunday and that Christ has risen, ...and that it's OK to smile!*

Several times in his notes Peter quoted the French writer Leon Bloy, who maintained, *joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.*

Peter's joy often expressed itself in his spontaneously breaking forth and declaring in poetic strain, *they called it lovely Derry on the banks of the Foyle*, words from a traditional Irish song one of whose verses runs:

*Oh I know a wee spot 'tis a place of great fame  
And it lies to the north now I'll tell you its name  
'Tis my own native birthplace and it's on Irish soil  
Sure they call it lovely Derry on the banks of the Foyle.*

Peter's joy showed itself in his joking too. Even after Peter had retired, he was a regular choice for local undertaker Brian McElroy to accompany funerals to the cemetery to lead prayers at the burial. On the journey Peter was known to phone his great friend Frances Mitchell and tease, "Guess where I am." "Are you at home?" Frances would ask, only to be told, "No. I'm in a hearse — in the front!"

Peter was also an avid reader of books, yet not a hoarder. As soon as he finished a book, he would leave it on a table in the dining room for anyone to take and read. In fact, his room was easily emptied after his death as he had very few books and belongings stored. He was able to let things go.

## TRIBUTES

When news of Peter's death broke, messages poured in:

—*"Deeply shocked and saddened at the news. Peter was a big man in every way - big in stature, big in heart, generous to a fault and wonderful company. I have many fond memories of him and shall miss my occasional meetings with him. His lovely soul will surely rest in Peace. Kindest regards and prayers galore."*—Fr Brendan McGuinness, Farnborough.

—*"We are saddened to hear the news of Peter Coffey's passing so suddenly. On behalf of our communities at Don Bosco Care and Rinaldi House we offer you and the Community at Crumlin our deepest sympathy. Our Ceo, Brian Hogan knew Peter very well. Peter performed the wedding of Brian and Susan his wife in the 1990s. May he rest in peace."*—Fr Val Collier, Don Bosco House, Clontarf. Dublin 3.

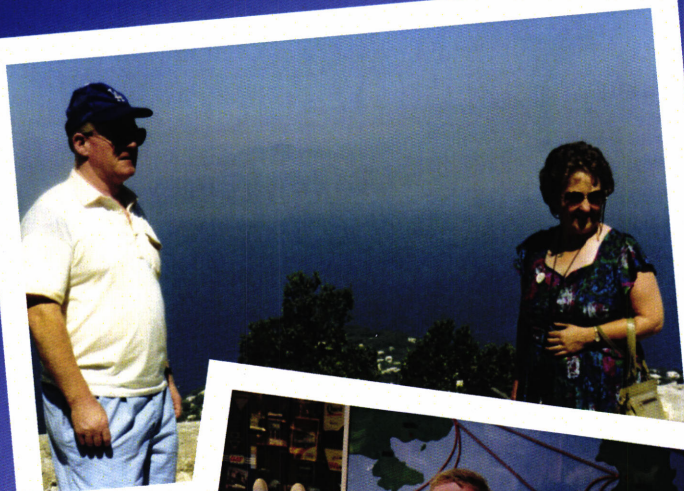
—*"Please accept the sincere condolences of the Lansdowne community on the death of Fr Peter Coffey. Those of us who knew him could always be sure of a bright and cheery welcome in Crumlin - always followed by a series of relevant questions! We thank God for his life and ministry and pray the good Lord to grant him Eternal Rest. Our prayers are with his family and his brethren in Ireland."*—Fr Edmund O'Neill, Lansdowne, South Africa.

—*"Peter was a lovely man, thoughtful and caring."*—Fr Hugh O'Donnell, Sean McDermott Street, Dublin 1.

At the month's mind Mass for Peter in St Agnes' Church on Saturday 27 June, the preacher recalled that Peter himself had told the story of a dear old neighbour of his called Annie. Peter paid her a visit one time to tell her he would be away for a week on a Retreat, and she wouldn't be seeing him. "I don't think I'll be here when you get back," Annie told him. (And she wasn't). Peter asked her, "Tell me, Annie, are you afraid to die?" "Oh, not at all," she replied. "Sure won't Jesus be *thrilled* to see me!" No doubt he was also thrilled to see Peter!

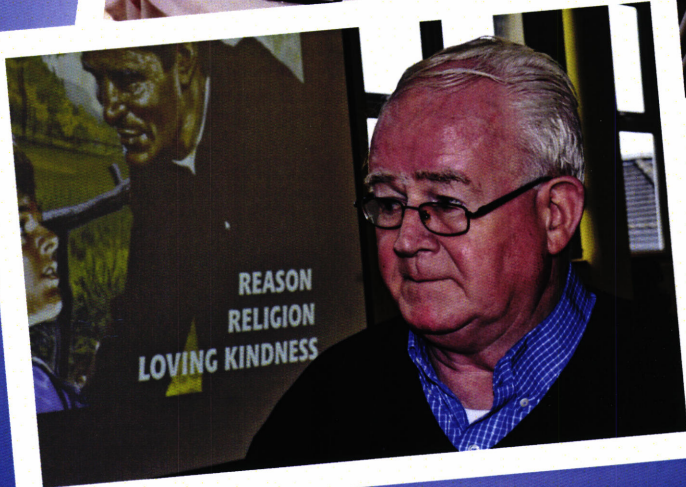
The preacher concluded his reflections on Peter saying: "It is our Christian faith that Peter was buried, submerged in Christ when he was baptised, and as he has shared through his physical death in the death of Christ, his story is now caught up in the story of the risen Christ. In the liturgy of the Church, time is not a succession of moments, what the Greeks call *chronos*; time is instead *kairos*, a graced moment, in which the power of Christ's Easter mystery – his passion, death, resurrection and ascension – are present to us and for us. This is our faith, the faith of the Church – of Mary Help of Christians, Joseph, Peter, Paul, John Bosco, all our favourite saints, and this is the faith by which Peter lived. This is the living faith that can give us hope and consolation." We pray this consolation for Peter's brothers Seán and Joe, his relatives, many friends at home and abroad, and his Salesian confreres. With this faith we commend our brother to your prayers.

Fr Pat Egan SDB, Rector.  
Salesian House, St Teresa's Road, Crumlin, Dublin 12.



*In Capri,  
with Sr Patricia  
Prenderville on  
her break from  
work in the Irish  
College, Rome,  
1990.*

*It's water!  
Sorrento.*



**For the Necrology:**

19 May P COFFEY Peter † Dublin, Ireland, 2015, a. 76