

Brother of the Month

Brother Francis O'Rourke 1940-2002



John Joseph O'Rourke was born in Bonastick, Clonaslee, Co Laois, Ireland on the 31st October 1940. John Joe was fifth in a family of five Brothers and five sisters. The family was brought up in a religious atmosphere. Later, one became a Brother in the Patrician Order and a sister joined the Sisters of Mercy. John Joe did not follow in the footsteps of his elder brother but instead entered the Juvenate of the De La Salle Brothers in Mallow, Co Cork. This was in 1953. He moved to Castletown, Co Laois, in 1955 to enter the Juniorate and completed his Novitiate and took his

first vows there in 1958. He was given the religious name of Francis. Besides the initial spiritual and educational formation, there were weekly walks, manual labour and time for playing games. Brother Francis was particularly skillful at the Irish game of hurling. He completed his secondary school Leaving Certificate examination in 1960 and qualified for the Teacher Training College in Waterford.

However, he postponed his entry to the training course and he was sent instead to East London, South Africa, where he spent five very happy years teaching in St. Anthony's Primary School. Those were the years of strict apartheid but somehow or other the Brothers were able to admit some black pupils to school without undue reprisals. Brother Francis returned to Waterford in 1965 and completed his teacher training course, made his final profession and returned to East London in 1967. After one year he was transferred to De La Salle Junior School, Victory Park, Johannesburg, where he spent the next two years. His terms in South Africa were marked by a seriousness of purpose in teaching as well as on the sports-field. He learned how to coach rugby and cricket and he himself played a strong game of tennis. The students in South Africa enjoyed both school and sports.

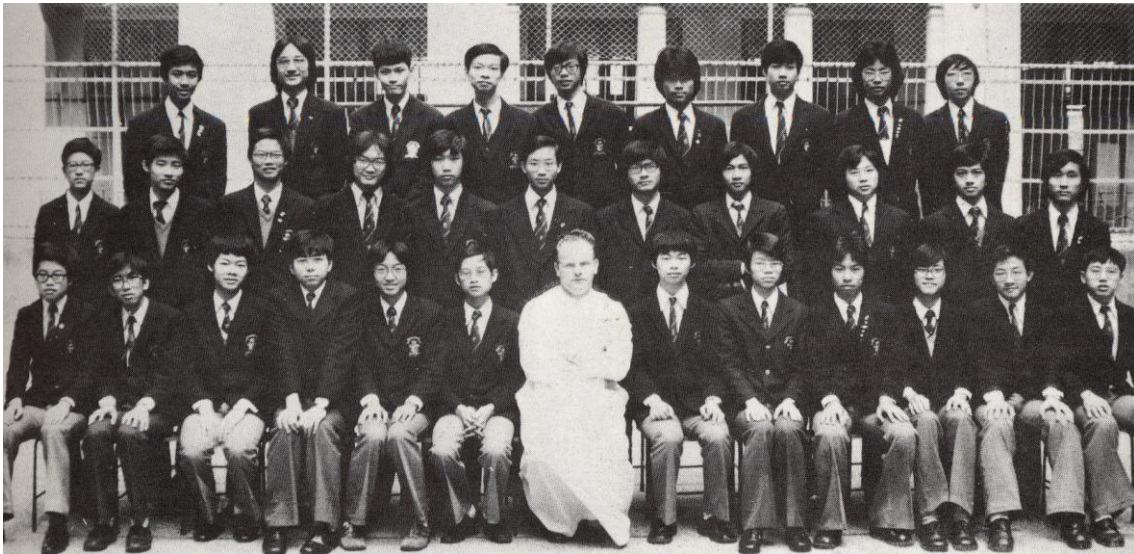


He returned to Ireland in 1970 to study for his degree and Higher Diploma at University College, Dublin. He took English, History and Irish for his degree course.

Despite the heavy university workloads he was employed at the same time in full-time teaching in Mount La Salle School, Ballyfermot. He managed both his studies and his teaching well and took out his degree in 1973. Apart from short teaching spells in Lasallian schools mainly in Co Dublin, Brother Francis was to spend the next 24 years of his life in Hong Kong.

It was an extraordinary move within the space of a few years, from the African continent to Asia. Nobody is quite sure what it was that attracted him to Hong Kong, to the doorstep of China.

The experts say it was his contact and friendship with Brother Alphonsus Breen, the Hong Kong Superior at the time. Others say it was his ties with his birthplace and the fact that a number of Brothers from that area of Ireland were working in that part of the world at the time. Perhaps it was just that he heard the Master's call to make disciples of all nations. In any case, it was in Hong Kong that he settled into his life's work of teaching and administration.



His first assignment in Hong Kong was to teach English, Religion and Physical Education in St Joseph's College. That seriousness of purpose mentioned earlier soon became evident. He prepared his lessons well and took no nonsense in class. Even the brightest students had to watch their steps. One of his strict rules was punctuality to class. Once the bell had gone and the classroom door closed there was no entry! It was also essential for the student to have his textbooks and exercise books. Failing this, the offender was bluntly told to "go home and get them". In some cases that would have required quite a journey. All in all his students adapted well and performed well.

He liked St Joseph's. His energies could not be confined to the classroom. The playground at St Joseph's could just about accommodate a tennis court and soon he was playing his favourite sport, tennis, and to devastating effect. He had a strong right arm and had no mercy if a shot was in any way straightforward. The only hope was to keep hitting the ball back and wait for a mistake. He also played squash at La Salle College and woe-betide if you came between him and the squash ball. Brother Francis played to win.



After five years of full-time teaching in St Joseph's a vacancy arose for the Vice-Principalship in Chan Sui Ki (La Salle) College and Brother Francis was appointed. He continued to teach a full workload in school. A year later he was appointed Director of the Community. In spite of the fact that it was his first appointment as Director he took the post in his stride and soon he began to show his ability as an organiser, a book-keeper, a spiritual leader, an innovator. He kept a close eye on both the school and community buildings with a view to regular maintenance and repair. He also ensured that the Brothers were well fed. It was during his time as Director that word went around that the Chan Sui Ki Community had the best cook in Hong Kong! And it seems many Brothers can vouch for this.

Brother Francis took a practical approach to matters of religion. The Mass and community prayer were his mainstay. He disliked all forms of showiness and if he detected any hypocrisy he let it be known. He was an early bird and would be in chapel early in the morning.

In 1990, another vacancy, this time of a rather high profile nature, arose with the

retirement of the Principal of the very prestigious La Salle College, Kowloon. Brother Francis was asked to take over the helm and he remained Principal of this College until his retirement in 1998. However, he continued to live in Chan Sui Ki College and commuted to school each day, arriving well ahead of opening hours.

As soon as he became Principal in September 1990, he realized that major parts of the school building and campus, including the famed track and field, were above government standard and therefore not the government's responsibility for maintenance. He knew that future maintenance,



renovation and development was only a matter of time and that a large sum of money would be needed for such. In 1992 he and some old boys initiated the idea of setting up a Foundation to provide the necessary funds. The La Salle College Foundation has since become one of the pillars of the school, spearheading fund raising activities and funding major school hardware and software developments.



That same year, 1992, was a memorable one for the College because it was then celebrating its Diamond Jubilee. The Thanksgiving Mass was celebrated by the chaplain Fr. James Lea and with several old boy priests concelebrating. On the 25th and 26th April the school opened itself to all visitors

and those Open Days came to a climax with a variety show. The first Staff Development Day, directed by Brother Gerard Rummery, was also introduced and such development days have become a feature ever since. They are meant to inspire teachers in their educational vision and mission and help them prepare for future challenges.

Brother Francis believed that parents played a vital role in the education of their children and hence, in 1994, the Year of the Family, a Parent-Teacher Association was formed. "Open and honest communication between teachers and parents enables a common understanding in important matters related to the students' balanced development. Parents, too, are happier when they are kept informed of school policies and on significant events in the life of the school." It is hard to imagine the school without such an Association nowadays, for it has become one of the most vibrant in the territory.

Other developments included an upgrading of the IT systems in the school, the addition of two new computer rooms, the computerizing of the Library, the introduction of Computer Literacy in the junior forms and Computer Studies in the senior. Besides, there was the establishing of a Language Laboratory and of a Lasallian Heritage Centre. The school also played host to groups of educationalists from mainland China and reciprocal visits as well as student exchange programmes were made. The school was buzzing with activity.



A major annual school function in La Salle is that of Speech Day. On Speech Days Brother Francis had to give annual school reports and he worked hard on these, flagging the successes, indicating areas for improvement and commenting on the trends of the times. And so, in 1996, we have him saying: "These are fast moving times and it is essential that we should have our finger on the pulse of the age, to be able to anticipate changes as they appear." In front of the microphone his voice carried to all corners. One guest was heard to remark that he would not need a microphone at all!

A short extract from the 70th anniversary commemorative publication of La Salle College, summarises many of his qualities. "Brother Francis was a quick and decisive person. He was a totally honest person and always expressed his feelings in an open, honest way. Whenever he set his mind on a new development or a new project, he would pursue it with an extraordinary single-mindedness, with vigour and with speed. He never missed a single school function, though not residing on the campus and, in the final years of his Principalship, though

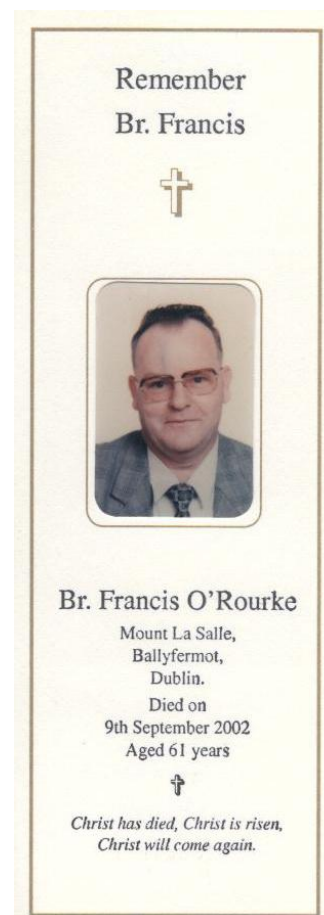
not in the best of health, he never missed a meeting with the parents, or a school function organised by the former students. Judging from the number of development projects he undertook during his tenure, he surely made the best use of his time as Principal."

His pretty direct style of work and communication was relished by some but of course did not please all parties. One thing was for sure. It would not take long for people to realize where they stood. In that sense, Brother Francis was very transparent.

The Brothers in Hong Kong nicknamed him "The Iron Man". Many who came into contact with him believed that he lived wholly on will power. They knew he was suffering much from diabetes but he would not let it interfere with his work or recreation. In that sense he lived dangerously. He used to say that it was better to live happily than to die miserably!

Ill health, and in particular his diabetes condition, however, forced his retirement as Principal in 1998. He had been suffering for some time from diabetes such that his eyesight had been affected and he needed a magnifying glass for the printed word. He had also taken to using a stick when out and about. In such circumstances he decided to return to Ireland in 2000 and was assigned to the community of Brothers at Mount La Salle, Ballyfermot. From there he would continue his dialysis treatment and investigate the possibility of having a kidney transplant or, more correctly perhaps, getting into the queue for a kidney transplant. It was a testing, time-consuming, frustrating time for one who had lived so energetically. Dialysis three times a week and almost five hours a day would have irritated many a patient. Despite the frustration and tiredness brought on by his condition, no one ever heard him complain. He was always in good humour and maintained his fighting, optimistic spirit up to the end.

The Brother Visitor of Ireland at the time, Stephen Deignan, recalls: "The urgent need for a by-pass brought him to the Mater Hospital in May 2002. It was an extraordinary 'yes' to the doctors considering the circumstances. Even his most optimistic friends weakened



in their faith in relation to his chances of survival. But, survive he did and we followed his progress through the intensive care ward, down to the high dependency unit and finally to the open ward beside the nurses bay. It was almost unbelievable. Even the nurses were caught up in the atmosphere of determination and dogged desire that Brother Francis would make a full recovery. It was in that tiny ward that I last spoke with him in the company of Brother Peter Foo, the Provincial of the Penang District. His voice was strong and his mood hope-filled and optimistic. Little did we know that the end was so near. He gave up the battle on Monday morning at 11.30.



He will be sorely missed by his family, whom he loved dearly and with whom he spent as much time as he could. His family repaid this love on all his home visits as well as during his final illness. May his soul now find peace and rest and may eternal light shine upon him forever.”

The funeral Mass for Brother Francis was held in Castletown on the 13th September 2002 in the presence of a large number of family and friends. The singing, led by Brother Basil, made a big difference. Brother Francis was then laid to rest in the nearby Brothers' cemetery. Of course he was not forgotten in Hong Kong where a Memorial Mass was held in La Salle College on the 1st October 2002.



Postings of Brother Francis

Castletown , Ireland	Juniorate	1953-1957
Castletown , Ireland	Novitiate	1957-1958
Faithlegg, Waterford, Ireland	Scholasticate	1958-1960
East London, South Africa	Teaching	1960-1965
De La Salle, Waterford, Ireland	Teacher Training	1965-1967
East London, South Africa	Teaching	1967-1968
Johannesburg, South Africa	Teaching	1968-1970
Bagnelstown, Carlow, Ireland	Teaching	1970
St. Benildus Prep School, Kilmacud, Dublin	Teaching	1970-1972
Mount La Salle School, Ballyfermot, Dublin	Teaching	1972 – 1975
La Salle Raheny, Dublin,	Teaching	1975-1976
St. Joseph's College, Hong Kong	Teaching	1976-1982
Chan Sui Ki (La Salle) College, Hong Kong	Teaching	1982-1990
La Salle College, Kowloon, Hong Kong	Principal	1990-1998
Chan Sui Ki (La Salle) College, Hong Kong	Retired	1998-2000
Mount La Salle, Ballyfermot, Dublin	Retired	2000-2002

Mr. Brother O'Rourke John Joseph
(Brother Francis O'Rourke)
Bro. Francis O'Rourke

