

March 2016

Brother of the Month

Brother Hyacinth Fitzgerald (29-09-1929 to 14-12-2014)

One Brother remembers: “Many, many years ago I stopped at the lovely village of Rathcoole and visited Brother Hyacinth at home. I found him sitting quietly in the parlour, doing the crossword I believe. Lunch was being prepared by his mother and I could feel the close relationship of mother and son. They kept up a regular letter correspondence all through life and he often spoke about her. After all, she had generously given up her only son to the religious life of the Brothers.”



There is a picturesque village on the outskirts of Dublin city, Ireland, called Rathcoole. It faces lush pasture land and has a fine view of the rolling hills of Dublin. In this village was born James Maurice Fitzgerald, later to be called in religion Brother Hyacinth. He was the eldest of four and the only boy. His sisters were named Kay, Joan and Evean. Evean is the only surviving sister and lives in New York.

Brother Hyacinth went to Primary school in a town called Naas, a school run by the Irish Christian Brothers. Come whatever kind of weather, he and a friend would cycle there every school day, a round trip of about 35 kilometres. No excuse was taken for being late to school. You were just told to stretch out your hand and given six of the best. Caning was the norm. Those were the times.



Brother Hyacinth often told the story of how he and his friend were meant to join the Irish Christian Brothers but,

because of a set of circumstances, ended up with the De La Salle Brothers. Before he joined the Brothers, he had visions of joining the air cadets and perhaps of becoming a sportsman.

If you came across Brother Hyacinth in later life, you would be forgiven for thinking that he was always a substantial, strongly-built man. Yet, early photos show him to be very trim ... and handsome too! After following the usual years of formation as a young De La Salle Brother in Ireland, he was selected for missionary work and was assigned first to Malaysia. On the journey East, he was in the company of Brothers Vincent Corkery and Casimir Hannon and they were in the care of Brother Remigius Blake who was returning to Singapore. Their ship left Southampton on the 22nd of October 1948. Brother Vincent recalls:



“On board he spent hours playing deck quoits, deck tennis and swimming. He excelled in these. He relished the usual stops along the way arriving in Penang on the 14th of November 1948. Penang harbour was decked out with bunting and special lights in celebration of the birth of Prince Charles.

After spending a day or two in Penang, it was off to Singapore, where he was taken to St. Patrick’s. In no time he got into badminton and played for hours, as well as swimming in the sea, nearby in those days.”

After Christmas he got posted to Penang where he fitted in very well with a host of young Brothers, local and Irish, under the benign rule of Brother Fintan. He taught English, Religious Studies, Economics and Commerce. He is still fondly remembered there, and particularly in East Malaysia, in the towns of Kuching and Sibü.

Brother Hyacinth was in his prime during those years. He was physically imposing, taught strictly but fairly and took part in school activities, especially by



playing and training badminton players. He loved that game and played it right up to retirement when he was in Chan Sui Ki (La Salle) College, Hong Kong. He was also a fan of rugby and fancied himself as a player and would occasionally tackle some formidable Brother opponents in a kind of scrum. All harmless fun.

There was one extended break from teaching and that was for university studies. He took English, Music and French, in University College Dublin, from 1960 to 1963. He spent one summer holiday in France,



Brother Hyacinth (front, first left)



polishing up his French. In later years he liked to sing French songs, with proper French expression. He was a particular fan of Edith Piaf. He himself loved to be asked to sing or to play either the violin or the mouthorgan, all of which he did with gusto. A particular favourite was an English translation of the Chinese 'Flower Drum Song.' He would also listen to songs sung in Mandarin and try to imitate. Some people thought he was fluent in the language!

After spending about thirty-five years as a teacher in Malaysia he had reached the age of fifty-five. Malaysian law at the time required that teachers retire at the age of 55. Brother Hyacinth did not want to retire. He and his friend Brother Mark Blake found ready acceptance by Brother Raphael Egan in Hong Kong. Brother Hyacinth was assigned to Chan Sui Ki (La Salle) College and had another ten years of productive teaching, mainly of English and Religious Studies. Chan Sui Ki College became his home for about 20 years, pre and post retirement. He loved the school and rejoiced in its achievements.

At one stage he took up learning the computer but it soon became evident that it was not his cup of tea. Much more to his taste was doing the crosswords found in both Hong Kong and Irish newspapers. In this, he joined Brother Mark and they would often consult each other as to the correct crossword

solutions. He also tried his hand at learning Cantonese but, as he put it himself, "my 72 year old mental computer is rusty, so success is slow."

For many years he was afflicted with hardness of hearing. It was diagnosed as tinnitus. It reached a stage when he would get lost during community prayer and be constantly looking for the right page. He could also pick things up wrongly and his responses were often amusing.

During those years in Hong Kong he used to climb Lion Rock regularly with Brothers Mark and Patrick. The latter remembers:

"On one memorable occasion, a group of us went climbing in the New Territories and managed five



pretty steep mountains in a row. It was a bitterly cold day, around zero degrees, and Brother Hyacinth was in shorts and short-sleeve shirt! On the way home, a group of young men spotted us and shouted "Tarzon" at Hyacinth. He felt good about that. A time came, however, when he let us off on our own and he would climb at his own pace. Later still he confined himself to 'local' walks. His knees began to cause some trouble and he wobbled and even fell a few times. It was time to engage home care."

Brother Hyacinth came to live in La Salle College in 2004. He would often introduce himself to guests as "the little flower." Since he was still a physically big man, this 'little flower' introduction took some people aback, until the humour dawned. It was fitting that his funeral Mass was celebrated in the church of the little flower, St. Teresa of Liseaux. Like St. Teresa, Brother Hyacinth led a simple, straightforward life, trying to do ordinary things to the best of his ability. He tried to follow the little way.



At first, health-wise, all went well but his was a slow decline into Alzheimers disease. His memory played all kinds of tricks and he would ask the same question time and time again. At first it was hardly noticeable but as the years went by it became much more pronounced. Part of the problem was that he could surprise people at times by remembering things quite clearly. It was also noticed that he ate his food very quickly and would be finished well before the rest. It was only later that the doctor informed us that much of the food lay undigested in his stomach.

When he had to resort to a wheelchair to get around, his carer would take him down to the lower floors of the school where he would watch the students coming and going and especially watch them playing football. He missed being in the thick of things.

A number of visits to St. Teresa's Hospital indicated that the time for more professional care had been reached. Fortunately a room and bed was found in the newly-opened Unit for the Elderly in the hospital where Brother Hyacinth received continuous and loving care until his death, was bathed every day and fed regularly. But complications set in, including suspected cancer, obstruction of the biliary duct, diabetes and jaundice.

The end came quickly and quietly at about 12.55am on the 14th of December 2014.

In the gospel reading for the funeral Mass, the apostle Thomas asked about the way, the way to follow Christ. Brother Hyacinth found the way to



Christ in his life as a De La Salle Brother. He kept his eye on the goal, persevered in his vocation and will now surely enjoy the banquet referred to in the first reading.

Special thanks go to the Mass celebrant, Fathr Gabriel, the altar servers and choir from La Salle College, the readers, photographers, prefects, student association members and scouts from Chan Sui Ki College, the Sisters and nurses of St. Teresa's Hospital who took Brother Hyacinth to their hearts and Ah Ying, the faithful carer at La Salle College, the Kowloon Funeral Parlour who attended to so many details, all those who sent flower wreaths and donations and the funeral organizing committee who took their task with seriousness and devotion.



Brother Hyacinth was laid to rest in the Brother's plot in St. Michael's Cemetery, Happy Valley. ■

Postings of Brother Hyacinth

Castletown	Juniorate	1944 - 1945
Castletown	Novitiate	1945 - 1946
Mallow	Scholasticate	1946 - 1948
St. Xavier's Institution, Penang	Teaching	1949 - 1956
St. Paul's Institution, Seremban	Teaching	1957 - 1960
University College, Dublin	Degree	1960 - 1963
St. Joseph's School, Kuching	Teaching	1963 - 1974
Sacred Heart School, Sibul	Teaching	1975 - 1984
Chan Sui Ki (La Salle) College, Hong Kong	Teaching	1985 - 1995
Chan Sui Ki (La Salle) College, Hong Kong	Retirement	1995 - 2004
La Salle College, Hong Kong	Retirement	2004 - 2014