

Brother of the Month **Brother Eugene Sharkey (1926-1994)**

There are many “bits of heaven” dotting the land and seascapes of County Donegal, Ireland. Among them is an area called the Rosses. It was here, in the townland of Mullaghderg, that James Patrick Sharkey was born on the 25th February 1926. He was the eldest in a family of eleven, six brothers and five sisters.



One reason for the natural beauty of the Rosses is its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean. James was often happily out in the boats with the fisherfolk. He was to retain a lasting love of the sea and it is little wonder one of his favourite songs was “Shoals of Herring.”

If the call of the sea was strong, so too was the call to serve God. At the age of fourteen, James answered that call and headed for De La Salle Monastery, Castletown, County Laois, far from home and from the sea. There he spent two years in study and in preparation for a life of educational service with the De La Salle Brothers. He then entered the Novitiate and, as a sign of serious intent, took the habit on the 7th September 1942. He was also given his new religious name, Brother Eugene.

The Novitiate was a year for spiritual formation but before its completion there was yet another call, this time for volunteers for the missions. Brother Eugene volunteered and was sent first to a house of studies in Mallow, County Cork, where he successfully completed the school certificate examination in 1947. This was also the year that his mother died, rather suddenly, at the age of forty. It was a bad blow for her large family but they retained her strong faith and determination to face and cope with adversity.

The next phase of life was to attend a Teachers’ Training College in Strawberry Hill, London. But prior to that, Brother Eugene was sent for exposure and experience to schools for young delinquents which the Brothers ran in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Eugene was posted to Scotland in the summer of 1945. There he had to balance freedom with responsibility, something he had already learned from his upbringing.

In September 1947 he headed south for Strawberry Hill to begin the two-year teachers' training course. Many of his classmates were already army veterans of the Second World War. The excellent staff, the diverse mix of students and the balanced curriculum helped to produce teachers of exceptional maturity and competence. Brother Eugene completed the course in the summer of 1947, was allowed home for a holiday with his family, and by September was ready to leave by boat for Singapore. Brothers Edmund Matthews, Alban Lynam, Theodore Quigley and Macartan Flanagan were in the same group, while Brother Herman Fenton was the elder statesman.

The troopship "Dilwarra" left from Southhampton and reached Singapore on the 9th October 1947. While awaiting his assignment, Brother Eugene taught for a few months in St Anthony's Primary school and was then, in January 1948, posted to St Michael's Institution, Ipoh, Malaysia.

All through his four years in Ipoh he taught three secondary 3 classes, three classes of English and religion in his own class of 3A. It soon became apparent that he taught thoroughly and systematically. He worked hard and expected his students to do likewise. They did.



On Retreat in Malaysia in the early 50s. Brother Eugene, back row, second from right

However, it was probably on the sports field that Eugene left the greatest impression. Evening after evening he was on the field in shirt and shorts while his athletes warmed up. They then ran around the field with Eugene at their heels. There was no place for laggards. The school team won all before them for a few years. Brother Eugene never bragged about this and if the topic were raised he would just state the facts. He himself was not a great gamesman, apart from

playing the occasional games of football or badminton. He did, however, play a tough game of tennis, with commendable power-passing shots.

After having completed four years in Ipoh, Brother Eugene was transferred to La Salle College, Kowloon, Hong Kong, arriving there on the 27th July 1953. He was to spend the rest of his life in Hong Kong. In 1949, La Salle College had been requisitioned by the British army for use as a military hospital. The College was “in exile” in Perth Street, in somewhat makeshift circumstances, and would not be de-requisitioned until 1959. The Director at the time was Brother Patrick Toner, followed by Brother Felix Sheehan.

Eugene was asked to take English and Religion in the public exam classes of Form 5 and for the next sixteen years made Form 5A his own. His teaching method for English Composition was perhaps unique. This is how one of his students puts it: “ We were each allowed to make a mistake once and then 5 or 10 marks, depending on the seriousness of the error, would be knocked off from our total. However, if the same or even a similar mistake should recur, irrespective of its position in the essay, Brother Eugene would stop there and then accord zero marks for that piece of work. After tasting the bitterness of getting what Brother called ‘Nought’, we would exchange our essays among ourselves to weed out mistakes before handing them in”. Brother Eugene’s tactics paid off in the long run, as his former pupils will testify to this day.

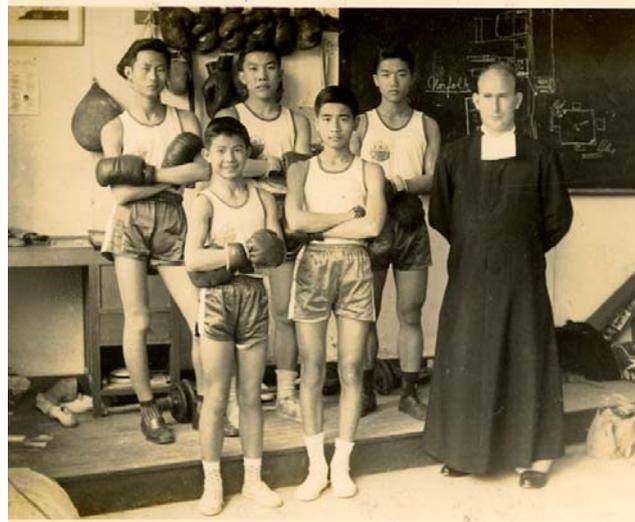
He could appear somewhat stern and spoke only when necessary. His classroom was always the most silent. Pupils tended to keep a respectful distance. Yet, here is a nice piece from one of his students at the time:



“ I came to know Brother Eugene in my final year at La Salle. He was my form master. For years, of course, he was ‘Gum Sing’, or Man from Venus, on account of his stern appearance and quiet manner. No one dared mess with him, in or out of class. To our surprise, however, he turned out to be quite amiable, with a nice sense of humour. That year we had excellent public exam results.”

Not so stern at times!

Outside the classroom Brother Eugene helped coach the athletes after school hours and he also assisted with the boarders. But perhaps he is chiefly remembered for setting up a boxing club and coaching, most successfully, boys who had never been in the ring before. There was a family tradition for boxing and Eugene's brothers did well at amateur level.



Brother Eugene with The Boxing Boys

One of his brothers, Pa, went on to compete in the 1956 Olympics and came away with a bronze medal.

It must have been this association with boxing that led to all kinds of rumours that swirled among the boys, by far the most dramatic being that Eugene, as a youth, had killed a lad when boxing and that that was the reason for his joining the Brothers!

The year 1969 brought a big change to Eugene's life. He was transferred, as Vice Principal, to a newly opened Lasallian school called Chan Sui Ki (La Salle) College and in September of the same year became its Principal, succeeding Brother Herman Fenton. Brother Eugene was to be its Principal for the next 21 years.

He proved to be a fine Principal, with clear objectives and targets. He treated his teachers and office staff as responsible adults but always kept the welfare of the pupils as his primary focus. His inherent sense of fair play, his firmness when required, his insistence on good order and discipline, inspired confidence and co-operation. He saw no reason why the school should not excel and excel it did.



*The founding fathers of
Chan Sui Ki (La Salle) College*



The pioneer staff of Chan Sui Ki (La Salle) College

In Chan Sui Ki the boys line up in the playground every day before going to class. Brother Eugene had only to appear on the staircase for complete silence to descend. As one Brother in the community put it: "he had the imperative fluid in the eye." The students readily accepted this approach to school life and thrived.

When Brother Eugene reached retiring age in 1991 he could look back with no small pride on forty-four years of unbroken service, the final twenty-one of which were as Principal of Chan Sui Ki. He had kept his hand to the plough, working steadfastly and assiduously in the Lord's vineyard. Never one to parade his virtues, it was clear that the Lasallian spirit of Faith and Zeal was his guiding light. In community among his Brothers, this spirit was evident as much in what he did not say as in what he did. To them he was a faithful companion on life's journey, a fine community man and a man of wise counsel. He was never known to lift his voice in anger.

One Brother recalls how in company, ever the strong silent man, he would signal disagreement with the flow of argument by a smile or rub the side of his nose with his index finger, no word spoken. However, in one to one situations he could be unrestrainably voluble.



In a relaxed mood with Brother Austin de Lemos

Although Brother Eugene appeared to be a strong silent man, he had his share of health problems. Sinus was a constant irritation and required nose surgery and he had a minor heart attack in 1971. But it took another 20 years for the real villain to emerge, in the form of throat cancer. Eugene had been a pretty heavy smoker, which may have contributed to the condition. In 1992 he was put on radiation treatment followed by “heroic” surgery which involved grafting in an 8 hour long operation. There was a slow recovery but he was in pain for many months and then the cancer caught up again. He was back in hospital a couple of times before the final haul, looking for cooling drinks for his throat. When the doctor broke the news of the end to him, he bore it with much peace and equanimity.

A great personal consolation was the visit of his brother Fred, to whom he was much attached, with his wife Eileen, from Australia. They stayed a couple of weeks, visiting him every day. It was a sad encounter but their presence and encouragement was much appreciated by Eugene.

The end came suddenly on the morning of the 16th of March 1994. The parish church was crowded at the funeral mass. In his homily, Brother Francis spoke of Eugene as “a deeply spiritual man whose strong faith was nurtured in the Christian atmosphere of his home in Donegal. His piety was not so much something he taught but something one caught from his gentleness, his silence, his very bearing. He never complained. He saw in all things the will of God and accepted it as such.” These traits were very close to that of the Founder, St La Salle.

One Brother, who knew Eugene well, wrote:
“I remember a Brother who was loyal and dependable, tolerant and uncritical of others. As a teacher and headmaster, he was consistent and confident in his approach and had the esteem and respect of all. He took his final illness calmly and died with a dignity befitting his lifestyle.”

After his funeral one of his 1961 past students said to me: ‘I remember Brother Eugene as a man of justice.’

What more can be said!

