

Eulogy Delivered for Brother Matthew (Michael Allan) Bell F.S.C. by Brother Peter McIntosh

Matthew was a man small in stature but my, what a wonderfully big heart! His heart embraced his family of five brothers and six sisters including his many nephews and nieces. He was immensely proud of his brothers in religion, the De La Salle Brothers, whom he embraced with great affection when as a young man he entered the Training College after the second World War. His love knew no bounds and wherever he served in community he made lifelong friends who kept in touch and were constantly the recipients of his loving advice when they sought his counsel and especially his prayers. I do not know if we will ever know of all those he has helped – Sister Martina told me that already she had been contacted by a lady in Southport who spoke of Matthew's kindness to her when her husband died some fifteen years ago and of his friendship over the years. Br Aloysius tells me that one of the nursing staff at the Villa informed him that when her married daughter was having trouble starting a family she informed Matthew and as a result of this confidence Matthew gave her the medal of St Gerard Majella and the prayers to be said. She attributed her daughter's family to Matthew's prayers. I am sure the good Lord will have recorded the many friends he had and how many people he assisted besides his students, and especially in his years of retirement.

Many while admiring his great fortitude under suffering felt that he should have departed some years earlier but he had other ideas and felt that he still had work to do for the good Lord and his children. Brother Aloysius informed me that on one of his recent visits to the hospital he objected and asked why he was put in this ward with "all these old men". Aloysius informed him gently, "Matty, you are an old man". I was especially touched on my last visit to Southport that each morning after Mass, Matthew held court in the chapel as friends moved to speak to him and mothers brought the children to meet and speak to him – he knew their names and often had some little thing to give them.

Michael Allan Bell was born at Taree on 25 May, 1929 the eighth child and the fourth son of Michael and Mary Ellen. He had three younger sisters and two more brothers. This large family lost their father in 1940 and six years later their mother also died but not before she had given consent to Allan to leave home and join the De La Salle Brothers, after Br Fintan visited St Joseph's School in Taree to speak on Vocations. A couple of years later Matthew was joined in religious life by a younger sister, Mary, who joined the Sisters of St Joseph at Lochinvar. The Bells have always been a very united and loving family and still meet every year prior to Christmas on a designated day when all who are able, meet to enjoy one another's company. Family has always been precious as they depended so much on one another when they lost their parents prematurely and the younger members were cared for by their older siblings.

Allan arrived in the Juniorate on 20 January, 1947 and a few days later he and two other young men joined us in the Novitiate with the American novice master, Brother Francis De Sales who had arrived in Australia in 1946 after the War. He always declared to us that he had come to Australia "to convert the wicked Anzacs". He wished to have a worthwhile number on which to work so he collected all of us who were of a suitable age in the Training College to join the Novitiate. We were the largest group ever to enter the Novitiate -27 received the habit on 14 May 1947. Allan received the name Matthew and retained this name throughout his religious life. People today wonder at the large numbers of young people who joined Religious life after the War – perhaps this phenomenon

was due to the spirit of generosity engendered in so many young people who had seen their older siblings and young people generously volunteering for duty in the Armed forces during the War years.

We were professed on 24 January, 1949 and after two further years in the Scholasticate we were sent to teach and Matthew began a long and successful period at Katoomba. A real dynamo in his earlier days he moved quickly and it took some effort to keep up with him. His pupils soon realised his alert presence and that there was no way of hiding, or thinking that Br Matthew had forgotten or would give up the chase. He taught in the parish Primary School in Grades 5 and 6 for the first three years and then was asked to assume responsibility for the Junior Boarders of St Bernard's College at Clairvaux, the junior campus. I understand that St Bernard's ex-students are represented here today. This was the beginning of a long and for him a very happy time working closely with boarding school students. He spent many happy years here until he moved to Scarborough during 1964, once again with the junior secondary boarders of De La Salle College. Here in a new school he developed his gardening talents and spent many hours with the students in planting trees and beautifying the grounds in a newly established College. Maybe the superiors felt he needed some respite from Boarding School duties and so he moved to Victoria to St John's College, Dandenong in 1972.

Matthew was again requested by the Brother Principal to assume responsibility for the Junior Secondary classes in a large and growing Catholic High school and for the first time in his teaching career he came to work in co-education – not new to him in a way as he himself had been educated in a coeducational setting in Taree. His gardening skills and tree planting continued as he helped to beautify the school grounds, and also with more free time outside regular classes he became interested in handicrafts and became an expert in tapestry work and crochet – no doubt his sisters may claim some credit for helping him in this area.

In 1981 he commenced duties in Mentone and after a year there he was given time off to complete his Bachelor of Special Education in Adelaide, returning to Mentone to work in the large secondary department and once again to work with the junior boarders. Here his classroom skills were recognised, he was assiduous in his corrections, frequent tests, and always maintained excellent discipline which included the personal appearance and tidiness of his students- and Br Michael relates that he was approached often by students who wanted to be placed in Matthew's classes where they would be well taught and disciplined. Here it was evident that perhaps time was catching up and he experienced the beginnings of heart problems – he underwent open heart surgery early in 1988 but was able to take the year off when he travelled to Rome, the Holy land, France, the UK and on to the USA to complete a Renewal programme at Sangre de Christo, New Mexico with his long time friend, Br John Mitchell.

Matthew was able to spend three more very happy years at O'Connor Catholic High school, Armidale his last years working with students in the classroom. He was disappointed when the community closed and the Brothers withdrew from the teaching staff. He was asked to come to work at the Provincialate - his days in the classroom completed much to his disappointment, but his superiors could see that his stamina was no longer up to the daily grind of the classroom.

At Kensington he assumed secretarial duties that had been very much part of his life since his days in the Novitiate. He had brought with him to religion his talent as a typist and throughout his career in the classroom he had frequently been called upon to work in this area – often spending Christmas

vacations working for the Provincial in the office. He also was called upon to prepare for Chapters and he attended all the Chapters to assist with typing and to keep the information circulating at the various Provincial chapters over the years. From Kensington he moved to work in a similar capacity for the renewal centre at Narooma before moving to the Villa La Salle retirement community in 1995.

Matthew was first and foremost a great teacher under the banner of De La Salle – his family can vouch for the fact that he educated them about St John Baptist de La Salle and was proud to be known as a De La Salle brother. Sister Martina said, "He loved the Order and everything about it". He was always proud to be recognised as a brother - Brother Michael McCabe said that whenever they attended conferences or meetings of Religious from the Villa he insisted on wearing his habit. Even in his last days at the Villa he appeared in the Chapel at prayers in his religious habit. At the same time he always maintained a great loyalty to his family and maintained constant contact with them, especially in the years of retirement when he was so much more available to them.

Matthew had a great devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin Mary and her Rosary, and her statue and the Rosary beads had pride of place in his Unit at the Villa. He prayed the Rosary daily and distributed some hundreds of sets of Rosary beads according to one of the brothers who lived with him in his retirement, and while teaching he also encouraged his students in this devotion to Mary. It seems that part of this devotion was his prayers for his family and Br Michael informed me that Matthew related to him that he named every member of his family living and dead each day in his prayers – he could recite their names almost in the form of a litany.

Another area he mentions in his Tour of Duty was that in most communities where he worked he volunteered and undertook the duties of sacristan. It was a work of great devotion for him to have everything associated with the Chapel, the Blessed Sacrament and the celebration of Mass in perfect order. The vestments had to be spotless and the linen not only washed but starched and ironed before they were used. It was only in the last few months that he was persuaded to relinquish these duties because of the danger of his falling.

Many of us can vouch for his other great interest, namely gardening – I mentioned earlier that the trees he planted in his former communities and schools are witness to his interest in beautifying the environment. I heard one brother describe him as an "Octopus" when it came to the garden – give him a corner and eventually he would spread his tentacles over the whole area. He was a great walker and he combined the two interests. It was rare for him to return empty handed helping himself to anything over the fence of the neighbours or if he fancied something he was not too shy to approach the home owner and hence gain another friend. I heard one story from a brother who unconsciously became an accessory when he accompanied Matthew and his sisters on a tour of the Botanical gardens in Melbourne as they collected cuttings and other samples as they went. He concluded that the umbrellas they carried were for hiding their ill-gotten gains and not for sheltering them from the rain. Another brother who fancied himself as a gardener confided to me that while he carefully cultivated his plants without results, Matthew could place a few sticks in a pot and soon they would be blooming- he truly had green fingers

Another of his interests was his Crafts, namely long stitch or tapestry and crochet. He left behind in several of the communities where he worked one of his tapestries of the Blessed Virgin. These crafts were exhibited in local shows at Armidale and the Gold Coast where he won awards, but this was

another area where he continued his apostolate of helping others. His sisters distributed countless numbers of his shawls to Nursing homes, and special friends also benefited from his generosity in this area. His hands were never idle and as he took his walks he continued his stitching work shedding wool ends as he went. One brother who followed him on one occasion maintained that the birds in Narooma lined their nests with Matthew's wool ends. No doubt some of the countless people who benefited from his work with Meals on Wheels were also recipients of this generosity.

Matthew enjoyed the simple things in life and won many friends through these simple interests and through his loyalty and generosity to others. His helping hand was always available.

It was this noble and generous heart that finally gave up the fight last week. The prophet tells us 'Those who are wise will shine brightly as the expanse of the heavens and those who instruct others unto justice will shine as stars for all eternity'. I am sure that Matty's star will always shine brightly. Farewell dear friend -It has been a privilege to have walked with you through the years - May you rest now in peace with the Lord..