

Brother Maximus – George Bangs – 1921-2008

Bro Tom Campbell

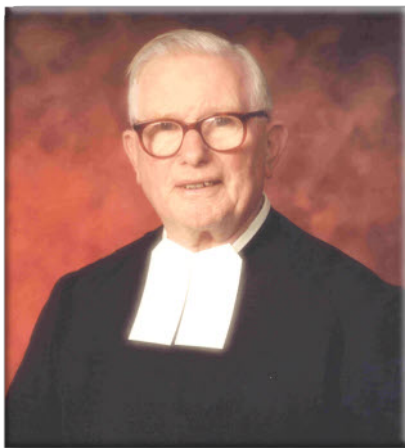
Maximus took the trouble to leave a short memoir of seven pages written in a shaky hand and probably put together in the 90s and before he moved to St John's from Cardiff, where he had been Director of the Community. The memoir is sketchy and takes us up only to 1945 when he graduated from Cambridge (Christ's College) with a degree in History and was appointed to the Sheffield Community. The first paragraph is worth hearing –

"I was born 2 October 1921 at 143 Chapel St, Salford. The house has since been pulled down. It was a corner shop with the house partly behind it and partly above it. Nearby was the printing works for Thompsons Weekly News. It also printed several Boys' Papers like 'Adventure' and 'Hotspur' and a series of Sexton Blake Detective Stories: so I had a steady supply of juvenile reading". Although there is some reference to his parents e.g. that his father (George) was born in India in 1877 and to his grandparents (his maternal grandfather went off to be part of the Alaskan Gold Rush and died there) there is, surprisingly, no mention of his sister, but Karen Hart, his niece, remembers her very well as very close to Max. Her name was Agnes but was known to everyone as Fairy. She died at the young age of 52 or 53. There are several photographs of her in Max's room – beautiful and very petite – hence the family name. Two cousins Ada and Kay survive him. Ada visited him recently from Scotland where she lives, but is in USA visiting her family and will be very disappointed not to be here today. Kay lives in the USA.

I was interested to hear that Max was not unique among us – in his name, I mean. There is another Bangs – a Brother Arthur Bangs at La Salle College, Philadelphia. George and Arthur have met at least once. Arthur sends his condolences on George's death. My informant concluded by saying "So, the Bangs of the Institute are now down by 50%!"

The memoir gives us some information of his early life in the cathedral parish of St John's, Salford where he grew up, attended the Infant and Junior Schools and in 1933, together with one other boy from St John's won a scholarship to De La Salle College, Pendleton where he first met the De La Salle Brothers. Not quite true. Max tells how he was an altar server at the cathedral and served the

6.30 Mass there each morning. But sometimes he was fortunate to serve the 7 o'clock Mass at the local FCJ Convent and enjoyed the full cooked breakfast afterwards in the parlour before heading for school. Max's enjoyment of his food was evident even then. But in 1932, the year before he won the scholarship, he was one of a group of his year at St John's chosen by Canon Sharrock – mostly from the altar servers, I think – to visit De La Salle and take what we would now call an entrance examination given by the Head, Brother Kevin Hayes. Max writes that he was not among those chosen. I wondered if Kevin remembered that decision in later years. He then describes a rather touching little event when after two years at De La Salle, and at the age of 14, he



had decided to go to the Juniorate with a view to becoming a De La Salle Brother. He writes, "That night I stood at the corner of the table as we were having our evening meal. My Dad readily agreed; my Mum was full of apprehension and hesitation but finally agreed. Next day I told Brother Albeus. That evening he came to the house: afterwards my Mum was happier. Albeus kept in touch by letter". And so the young George Bangs was launched in 1935 at the age of 14 on the journey to become the Brother Maximus of the next 70 or more years.

A glance at his list of placements over more than 50 years, from 1945 to 1997 when he came to retire here at St John's, shows a rich mix of experiences and responsibilities – Director of Student Brothers and Lecturer in History at Hopwood Hall, Novice Master in Kintbury, Headteacher at West Park here in St Helens and teaching placements in Liverpool, Sheffield and Cardiff. The list is a telling comment on the confidence that was placed in him and the high regard in which he was held among the Brothers. And although the Max of later years was a mature religious and a confident professional there are hints in the memoir that he did not always share the confidence that was placed in him and had moments of hesitation regarding what was being asked of him. Former students and colleagues speak generously about his dedication and his gifts as teacher and collaborator. Max gave something of himself to them and that resonated and remained.

There are many stories about Max because he was that kind of character. You'll probably hear some of

them later today. And the idea of people reminiscing about him – his gentleness, his loveableness and his foibles, his weaknesses as well – would not surprise him and would cause him some amusement for he had a gentle sense of humour and an ability to laugh at himself. And Max smiled and laughed very readily and scowled very little.

It is a wonderful thing to record about anyone that they had few enemies and many friends and tended to see the best in people. Without putting him on too high a pedestal, most would agree that he was a good and genuine man who had a gift for friendship and an openness that endeared him to people and a lovely sense of gratitude for what life had given him and for the people around him. This is especially true of his time here in St John's. But beyond St John's there are many who will recall friendship and help and kindness from Max over many years – that's why we have his friends with us from Sheffield, West Park, Cardiff and the wider Lasallian family. In this connection I think he would wish me to recall his very good friend, Sister Jennifer, who was Head at Notre Dame. He was a faithful friend and thanks to help from Michael O'Hara, his driver, was able to visit her until her untimely death.

Max the raconteur, the storyteller, will live with many who knew him. He was a man of many stories – stories about him but also from him as a keen observer of the human condition. He could be enthralling and infuriating at the same time as he reached for his glass of red wine and intoned with considerable deliberation, "And for my next point . . ." and the unspoken, gentle impatience, 'Get on with it, Max!' In fairness, however, people found him a patient listener and a lover of company – a genial member of any gathering.

Our Communion hymn spoke of 'earthen vessels'. It was one of his favourites and no wonder for in recent years fragile health and frequent visits to surgeries and hospitals was his lot. This, combined with deteriorating sight, was a real cross for him and cast him increasingly on the care of others. He became almost totally dependent on his carers and his wheel chair. And what care he had! Michael,

Director, and Maureen, Manager and the wonderful staff here in St John's looked after him in quite an exceptional way. They were his eyes and his ears and his writing hand - night, noon and morning. Yes, he could still be cussedly independent and you could say that in the end he paid a price for that. For me it was a privilege and a touching experience to witness how he was cared for especially in his last week or so. The hospital staff were magnificent. After a spell in Intensive Care it seemed he would be transferred to an open ward where in due course he would die. It was never going to happen like that. Maureen, no doubt with Karen agreeing, made the decision that he would be cared for at home in St John's. Those last few days in Max's life were quite remarkable. Maureen and Niece Karen scarcely left his bedside and along with a succession of devoted Staff, they loved and cared for Max through death and into eternity. It was something special and with the gentle ministrations of Fr Charles and community support I think he was made ready to leave us when he did.

Whatever his shortcomings, Max was a man of deep faith and prayer, of conviction and fidelity to his vocation. One heard staff and friends say of him that he was incapable of disliking anyone. That deep human goodness in Max which was the Lord's lovely gift to him found generous response in his life, generated goodness around him and, unsurprisingly, was crowned with goodness from those who saw him through his final days.

I am reminded of what the poet Raymond Carver said in his poem 'Late Fragment'-

"And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.

And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel my myself
Beloved on the earth"

Yes, I think you got that, Max.

We commend you, and all your loved ones, with great confidence to our faithful God for eternal rest and peace.

More tributes to Brother Maximus

From Br Alfred

I knew Brother Maximus, though not very closely, during my four years at Hopwood (1957-61). When he was at St John's, our community for retired Brothers even a few years ago and I might be visiting, he would very willingly run me to the station in his little red car, though even then his eyesight might leave me a bit worried. I was moved from Liverpool to St John's in October 2005 and from then on knew him much more personally. The time came when his legs no longer carried him and he became room-ridden for about two years and was provided with a wheel-

chair. The staff were wonderfully caring; he bore his internal ailments and the close attention needed with great patience. Brother Michael Curran provided the helps that would assist his diminishing eyesight; gradually their usefulness diminished, but he still had the radio and talking books borrowed from the public library. Every month he wrote up detailed community notes for the *Lasallians*. In the end, he dictated them to a devoted carer, Karen. He was meticulous in dealing with correspondence received. He put aside the envelopes for recycling,

and had the used stamps put in the box in the dining-room. He was a man of deep faith and spelt out for me once his faith in the Eucharist. I was with

him with others when he died, but I will leave a fuller mention to others.

From Bernard Stuart
Assistant Director of Education, Diocese of Salford

It was in 1976 that I first met Brother Maximus. Having come straight from Novitiate in Eccles to West Park, I was to spend the next 7 years in the community led first as Head and then as Head & Director, in a way by default, given events earlier in the year, by Maximus. He had arrived from Sheffield, a school, community and city for which he expressed a great fondness. His task was to follow an illustrious list of Heads, the most recent being Brother Damian McCarthy. Previous to this time, I had only heard of him anecdotally from Brother Celestine (my Novice Master) as being the former Novice Master. We had at least two things in common, those being our love of history/teaching of history and the fact that St. Helens was a new place.

Maximus was the perfect gentleman in all settings and on all occasions. Of this, I was reminded in a recent email conversation with Brother Aidan Kilty. Maximus always took a great interest in each individual – among the staff, pupils and the wider community. It would be fair to say that he enjoyed, even delighted, in being the Headmaster and the Director of the Community (following the departure of Brother Cyril Hutchinson). Although the tasks he was directed to, out of necessity, by the Visitor, Brother Victor, were ones that eventually took a toll on him. I say this while remembering that we also had Brother Hilary Cluderay in the Community – fresh from his time at De La Salle Pendleton. It was not in Maximus' nature to have to deal with some of the aspects of the roles which were 'thrust' upon him. On reflection, I am sure that he found some difficulty in dealing with their more challenging aspects. In part I am referring to events that take a toll: the unexpect-

ed deaths of Brother Dermot and of Terry Thompson, who was the Metalwork teacher in the school.

I would have to say that I always received a considerate and fair treatment from him. I appreciated his guidance and was buoyed up by his humour. On one occasion when I required an immediate visit to the hospital, Maximus was the one on whose door I knocked and who, true to character, was there for me. During the period, 1976-1983, the school thrived and came fully into the state system, although Maximus did not appreciate the idea given in a Community meeting that we could have changed the name to Alder Hey Comp! Relations with the adjoining Notre Dame school were excellent and, I have no doubt that, when the time came for reorganisation in St. Helens this positive connection played a part in the negotiations that resulted in the birth of De La Salle High school.

Following the 7 years I left for Coatbridge and, owing to the fact that I did not return until 1985, I missed Maximus' retirement in 1984 (?) Nevertheless, I know that he greatly enjoyed the time he spent at the Preparatory school in Cardiff. It was another stage in his life after which he was to return to St. Helens. The last time I met Maximus was for the funeral of Brother Victor at Clayton Court. He was still his gentle, charming self despite having suffered a minor stroke. In the last few years I have enjoyed reading his contributions to the Newsletter. In these he continued to show his care of detail and his concern for the individual. I think that I may conclude suitably by quoting Pat Buchanan writing of Ronald Reagan, in July 2004: "Hopeful, big-hearted, idealistic—daring, decent and fair. We shall not see his like again."

From Brother Nick Hutchinson

In July 2004 I gave to Max some enlarged photocopies of pages from 'The Road to Nab End - A Lancashire Childhood' by William Woodruff, a book I had just finished reading and which I knew would well interest Max, having grown up in the streets of Salford not far from the Catholic Cathedral. He mentioned to me that he remembered so well from his childhood, there being people in the same degree of poverty as described in the book. Max's comment so struck me that I wrote it down at the time, as follows:

"Our family was so fortunate not to be poor. We had four shops but, because my father let the poor and destitute have things on 'credit' (that he knew would never - could never - be paid) the four shops reduced in number to just one: the

single shop remaining was that which was part of our family house. I never remember my father expressing any bitterness at what had befallen him because he had acted in charity.

"The only time my father made a comment was when a man passed our shop window and looked in: this was a man who owed money but now was very much better off. I remember my father simply saying: 'That man owed me a lot of money.'"

As Max was recounting this, I reflected on how certain values of his parents - such as generosity, of not complaining, of a great sense of thankfulness, of appreciation and gratitude - Max had taken as his own.