

25 February

Br JOSEPH PENNY

19 September 1836 – 25 February 1914



There was a time when our obituaries used the word ‘saint’ and its synonyms easily and lavishly but with Joseph Penny there were good grounds for such language. In 1934, twenty years after Penny’s death, Fr General Wlodek Ledochowski ordered memoirs to be written of four English Jesuits who, presumably, were considered possible candidates for official honoured recognition by the Church. Penny was one of them.

Born at Low Moor near Clitheroe, NW England, he entered the Society in 1863 and was among the first party to reach South Africa in 1875. He had been a cook at St Beuno’s and Roehampton and now took up the same work at St Aidan’s. He was to remain there until 1884 when he returned to England and took up cooking again in Glasgow.

He also instructed converts and strengthened the faith of waverers at Garnethill (Glasgow) and was loved by the poor who began to call him ‘a saint’ and ‘perfect gentleman’. He loved being a brother and felt there was a danger in being a priest! ‘Pride is a fearful thing,’ he’d say, ‘Just because a man can do something, he thinks he must necessarily take the bun.’

It was claimed he could work miracles but, while there were cures, it has also to be noted that he learnt much from his uncle who was a ‘herbalist of renown’ in Clitheroe. Certainly he had ‘familiarity with God’ and when he got blood poisoning in Africa and the doctor tried to get the Superior to order him to have his arm amputated to save his life, he overheard the conversation outside his door. When the Superior came in to talk to him, Br Penny pre-empted him and said, ‘a brother in the Society with one arm is not much use; let’s make a novena.’ The arm was saved.

He spent his last years at Mount St Mary’s where the boys revered him.