

Dr. Adrian Fortescue • Priest & Musician



Edith Cowell — *August 1923*

ADRIAN FORTESCUE

DR. FORTESCUE was not a born parish priest, but he was a far better one than many people who think they understood him suspect. The work was often against the grain—it offended the extreme reticence which was the key-note of his character—but he never shirked a duty. His visits to the poor and the sick were paid with the most scrupulous regularity, no matter how busy he might be, and he was never known to refuse to see any caller, however inconvenient it might be for him to interrupt his work to receive him. That reticence of his, and his horror of humbug, as well as his impatience with stupidity, and his absolute inability to grasp the difficulties of untrained minds and to make excuses accordingly, often caused temporary misunderstandings between him and his parishioners. There is no harm in saying—because everyone knows it—that he had a quick and very acid wit. Often—but not nearly so often of late years—he wounded the feelings of inoffensive people without, apparently, being able to realise that he was cruel. When he did realise it, he gave himself no peace until he had made amends. He would catch you up on his bicycle in the town, jump off, and without any preliminary good-mornings (he hated ceremony, and would never shake hands): ‘Look here,’ he would say, ‘let’s be friends. I’ve been a beast to you. When are you coming to tea with me? Come next Monday.’

In one way, at least, he was an ideal parish priest. His congregation was (as Dr. Vance said in his funeral oration) the best educated in Europe. He took endless pains to make every person in the parish understand his religion, and appreciate the liturgy. He gave up two hours every Saturday evening to writing, in his exquisite hand, the notice-sheet for the week. During

the war, when numbers of Belgians came to Mass, he wrote every notice in three languages—French and Flemish, as well as English. (In the same way, in those days, on great feasts, he would preach three sermons, one after the other, in English, French and Flemish, at every Mass.) The notice-sheet always gave learned—and sometimes humorous—accounts of the saints whose feasts fell during the coming week, and detailed instructions, in cases of difficulty, for finding the proper of the Mass, so that when, for instance, there were more than twenty-four Sundays after Pentecost, everyone in the congregation knew that the parts sung by the choir were to be found in the proper for the twenty-third Sunday, while the rest of the proper followed that of the extra Sundays after Epiphany—and so on. All these little complications were mere child's play to anyone trained by Dr. Fortescue. The music for the following Sunday was also given, with the names and dates of the composers, and often a note on one or other of the hymns which were to be sung, as, for instance, *Iucunda Lux*: 'Phos hilarion,' a very old Greek hymn sung in the Byzantine evening service 'at the lighting of the lamps,' attributed to the martyr Athenogenes (second century); or, *Victimae Paschali laudes*, the Easter Sequence, by Wipo (*d.* 1048), chaplain to the Emperor Conrad II.

On great feasts these notice-sheets would be enriched with illuminations. Nothing was too much trouble, nothing was too good for the church he loved—the church he was seen to enter, by an unobserved spectator, for the last time to kiss passionately the altar at which he had said his Mass for fourteen years.

His Mass was something to remember. It was slow: every word was perfect, and audible; every gesture was measured. All that was about the altar was exquisitely tended. He spent hours with his servers, before every great feast, practising every detail of the cere-

monies. The offices for Holy Week, for which he had a deep devotion, were carried out with every possible ceremony in St. Hugh. (How angry he was if you said St. Hugh's!) He laboured incessantly to teach the choir to sing *Tenebrae*. To be a member of the choir was to receive, in fact, a thorough education in liturgical music.

In 1913 he compiled for the use of his people a book of Latin hymns with English prose translations, which Miss Newdigate printed for him at Astley Cottage, Letchworth. In the preface he says: 'I have gathered together all the hymns and chants which we usually sing, with a double purpose. First, that anyone who knows the tune may join the singers; secondly, that those who do not sing may be able to follow, to know what is being sung. Every text has an English translation on the opposite page. If anyone does not understand Latin, he can use the translation as his own prayer, and so join in intention with those who sing.' And further: 'There is not, and there is never likely to be, any religious poetry in the world worthy to be compared with the hymns of the Latin office . . . Our old Latin hymns are immeasurably more beautiful than any others ever composed. Other religious bodies take all their best hymns from us. It would be a disgrace if we Catholics were the only people who did not appreciate what is our property. And, from every point of view, we of the old Church cannot do better than to sing to God as our fathers sang to Him during all the long ages behind us. Nor shall we find a better expression of Catholic piety than these words, hallowed by centuries of Catholic use, fragrant with the memory of the saints who wrote in that golden age when practically all Christendom was Catholic.' Opposite each Latin hymn is an English translation in prose, and in most cases a note precedes the hymn, as, for instance, the '*Te decet laus*: Doxo-

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logy in the Evening Prayer of the Apostolic Constitutions (vii, 48; fourth century) in Greek; in Latin in St. Benedict's rule (xi; sixth century) to be sung at the end of Matins.'

All this trouble Dr. Fortescue took for a mere handful of ordinary people. In the same way, he wrote, and had printed and distributed among the parishioners, a leaflet on the classical pronunciation of Latin. This was one of his whims. Newcomers to the choir who sang *ch* instead of *k* in *caeli*, or *v* instead of *w* in *ave*, were scourged with whips, and he was so particular about the separate enunciation of each vowel in words like *saecula* that a strange priest coming to the church was heard innocently to regret that the choir sang in Cockney accents.

Another of his whims was to pronounce the E in England in a German manner, a habit of which no one and nothing could cure him—not even reprisals by the choir in the shape of a soft *g* in *agnus*.

His sermons were short, but they were always thought out, and packed with instruction. Sometimes he said things which surprised and displeased literal-minded people, who were not used to him. Year by year, when the feast of the English martyrs came round, he would begin his sermon by reminding his hearers that any person who suffered death 'for the dear Master we love so well' (this was a great expression of his) was a martyr, and that while we loved to honour those who had died for our holy faith, we should never forget those others, Protestants, who also died for what they conceived to be the truth.

Another characteristic saying, which came round every year about Christmas time, was a notice, on Sunday morning, that evergreens for the decoration of the church should be left in the presbytery garden on the afternoon of *O Rex Gentium*. In the evening he would announce with pained surprise that it appeared that

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there were actually some Catholics so appallingly ignorant that they had never heard of the Great O's, and, consequently, had to be told on which day *O Rex Gentium* fell.

Other jokes of his, outside the church, often took the form of riddles, and sometimes offended people who did not know him very well. As, for instance: What is the difference between X (a member of the congregation) and Balaam's ass? Answer: There is no difference. (Reproached, he indignantly denied having said this. 'I said the advantage was considerably on the side of the ass!')

His Lenten sermons on the Passion attracted a number of non-Catholics to Compline on Sundays. Then—and almost only then—he laid aside his reticence, and spoke words which drew tears and made converts. (He made a good many converts at Letchworth, and took endless pains over their instruction.) He was never eloquent. He was too honest intellectually, and too scrupulous, lest by any words of his he should call forth emotion which might hinder the free use of the reason. But few people who heard these Lenten addresses will ever forget them, and it was no surprise to his congregation to hear from those who were with him in his last illness that his mind dwelt constantly, in those weeks of agony, on the sufferings of our Lord, and that he many times refused morphia, in his determination to persevere along the 'royal road of pain' (this was another of his expressions) which, Lent by Lent, he had described in his little church at Letchworth.

During the last year he preached on Sunday mornings on the Gospel according to St. Matthew, and in the evenings he gave very detailed instructions on the commandments of the Church, insisting repeatedly on the duty of loyalty to authority. His complete candour, his high sense of honour, his generosity, and the

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strictness of his private life, made him universally admired and respected by all classes of people in Letchworth, even by those who had known what it was to feel the rough of his tongue. His services were at the disposal of everyone. I doubt if anyone who asked him to give a lecture, or translate a letter, or clear up a difficulty, went away disappointed. If the book club wanted a Dante lecture, or the dramatic society wanted help in their costumes for *Everyman*, or the golf club wanted an illuminated address, they all knew their way to the presbytery, and Dr. Fortescue always found time somehow to do what they wanted.

In a town where the Anglican clergy go about in cassocks, he was to be seen everywhere in his queer little Norfolk suit, and either bare-headed or in a boyish straw hat. His visiting-cards bore the simple inscription: Adrian Fortescue. No one was ever—outwardly—less priestly; no one was ever—inwardly—more thoroughly a priest.

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