

THE JOHN FISHER OLD BOYS' ASSOCIATION

Editor

M.G. Reaney

'St Mary's'

3 Clarence Road

Wallington

Surrey SM6 0EW

Telephone: 020 8647 3819

NEWSLETTER

October 2000

Reverend Edgar Gerard Dunn, R.I.P.

Father Edgar, at school 1937 – 1945, died on the 21st June after a long and painful illness courageously borne. His life was one that was devoted to the service of the Church and to the service of many hundreds of parishioners who became his responsibility during the 45 years of his priesthood, and the School and the Association can be justly proud of one who preached, practised and loved the Faith with such devotion. Brother Hugo has sent in the following touching tribute to Edgar:-

'Edgar was born on the 6th October, the same day as another distinguished O.B. My father would tell us how he telephoned his friend Mr Scarisbrick to say we had a new baby son. "Hold on a moment", was the reply, "and I'll tell you what we've got".

When we were in Prep in the thirties, most boys wanted to grow up as pilots or to play some sport for England. Nowadays, the ambition is doubtless to be pop stars or cyber millionaires. But Edgar was different. By the age of eight, he knew he would be a priest. He never considered spending his life in any other way, though he once admitted to me (after a particularly gruelling month of whist drives, jumble sales and raffles) that he occasionally thought he might have been more useful to souls as a missionary in some place where Father wasn't expected to be an expert on bingo and bring-and-buys.

Archbishop Amigo was his hero: in Edgar's schooldays, they even used to exchange letters, a practice Fr Tuohy used to find disconcerting in one of his boarders, though there wasn't much he could do about it. Whereas most grown-ups found it amusing that a 7 year old thought he knew his vocation, our Founder had a famous instinct in such matters. Perhaps his encouragement explains why, very early on, Edgar trained himself to be something of an expert on the liturgy and used to coach his fellow seminarians who found the finer points of Mass formalities difficult. One of the priests I met at the funeral told me that his "great test ... was slipping a spider into the chalice at my last practice. Did one drink from the chalice – spider and all?" I sympathised: I remember getting terribly irritated, when we used to serve Mass together at a Streatham Convent, because my kid brother would keep pointing out my mistakes – in a whisper that echoed through the chapel. The fact that he was always right made it worse.

Archbishop Cowderoy sent him to St Aidan's, Coulsdon (where my family and I lived at the time) under the lovable but slightly eccentric Father Hastings, who firmly believed in chucking his curates in at the deep end: on Edgar's arrival, he was told that he should commence duties the following morning as chaplain to a local hospital. What Fr Hastings neglected to mention was that "hospital" was a politically correct euphemism for what at school we called a "loony bin". Halfway through my brother's very first Mass in his first parish, some of the inmates decided that the chapel would look better without benches and started to carry them out. Father had to interrupt the consecration in order to dash out for staff who knew tactful ways of discouraging that sort of thing, a skill they never taught at Wonersh.

Edgar learned some other hard lessons at Coulsdon, but a great many more at Haywards Heath under – guess who? – Old Bill, sometimes known as KRMV, or even by his nickname Fr Millar Waugh. Although they were totally different in temperament, Edgar was smart enough to learn from O.B. many things that will be remembered by those of us who came under his tutelage: meticulous note taking (the parish records Edgar left for his successor at Colliers Wood are impeccable) and a love of history: he produced many fascinating monographs relating to the different place in which he served and a history of the Catholic Children's Society (of which he was for a long time Chaplain), as well as some really professional guidelines for visitors to the Holy Land, on which he became an expert, and where he visited frequently.

When, in 1946, National Service made its claim on Edgar, I wondered whether travel and the rough and tumble of Army life might affect his determination, but I need not have worried: as soon as the Army let him go, he returned to his studies at Campion House. From there, he went to Wonersh where he was ordained, at the age of 27, in 1955.

His first assignment as a parish priest was Colliers Wood, followed by Abbey Wood, where the celebrations organised by the parishioners for his 40th anniversary of ordination seemed to be a sort of dress rehearsal for the Millennium. The story goes that one of our nephews, an OSS officer highly trained in unarmed combat, having travelled a long way to be with my brother on his great day, stayed overnight at Edgar's presbytery. In the morning, a devoted lady parishioner of advanced years who had served in the French Resistance during World War II and was herself no slouch at karate, decided to call at the house to make sure everything was in readiness: she arrived at the precise moment young Martin decided to go out for a stroll. Concluding that Father was being burgled – or worse – she leapt upon his guest like the tigress she had been in the old days, and my brother, awaking to the commotion, was confronted with the spectacle of a wrestling match between an elderly lady and an athletic young man on his own doorstep.

His next parish was Sittingbourne, which apparently was intended as semi-retirement. The people certainly made him welcome, but the distances involved in parish visiting (always a speciality of Edgar's) made it far from that, and – I believe, at his own request – he returned to St Joseph's, Colliers Wood.

21 November 2000

That is not an exciting neighbourhood: much poverty, a lot of derelict buildings and evidence of failed businesses, a general air of depression such as is rarely found in southern England these days. But when one entered Edgar's church, it was a different world – modern, bright, welcoming – never so much as a light bulb that needed changing, a true oasis. The parish welcomed him back: at the funeral, many local people told me his return seemed too good to be true.

When I visited Edgar in hospital, his mind and prayers were always fixed on his parish. As vice versa, to judge by the stream of visitors, many of whom had sadly to be turned away because he was too frail and weary to receive them (indeed for weeks on end, he was unable to speak at all). They bombarded him with letters, flowers and a positive avalanche of Get Well cards. One little girl gave him a teddy bear for company, which delighted him. Remembering his own hospitality and his gratitude at theirs, many sent sweets, cakes and other goodies, even bottles of wine, though alas he wasn't allowed by his doctor to enjoy them.

Edgar died on the 21st June. Among his last visitors were Archbishop Bowen and an old friend from schooldays Bishop Howard Tripp who, incidentally, was a friendly tower of strength to me during the six distressing weeks when I was visiting my brother in hospital.

I was alone with Edgar when he died. In his last half hour, I had the happiness of seeing the tension leave his face. He knew he was quitting this life, and his expression turned from weary strain to one of contented resignation.

The hundreds who attended the funeral included 2 bishops, 66 priests and 2 ordained deacons. So many more people wanted to be there than St Joseph's could accommodate that Bishop Tripp consented to what they call in the theatre a "second house": he celebrated the requiem twice on consecutive days and preached at both. One of his stories was new to me: how, one Christmas Eve, Edgar heard that a former parishioner, living four hours drive away, was in some sort of trouble. He promptly apologised to the family who were due to be his hosts on Christmas Day that he could not join them after all; and, once the morning Mass was over, drove many miles to visit and comfort his old friend. Eventually, tired out, he got back that night to the presbytery and cooked his Christmas dinner – a can of spaghetti.

Edgar was what nowadays is fashionably called a "once off". God rest him.'