

## A 'COMMON' LIFE

*'The Salvation of many souls depends upon the prayers and voluntary mortifications offered for that intention by the members of the mystical Body, and upon the co-operation which Pastors and faithful must afford to our divine Saviour.'* Pius XII. 'Mystici Corporis' §42.

MANY tributes have been paid to the exceptional character and gifts of the late Fr. George Fressanges, who met his death so tragically at the height of his powers in the Ilford train crash in January. He has been the subject of a sermon preached in Norwich Cathedral; the leader of the Nonconformists in Norwich has written of him as a 'Man of God,' a saint; and the Catholic recognition has been widespread. But the breadth of Fr. Fressanges's character and accomplishments was so extensive that no attempt has as yet been made to convey a whole portrait of the man, nor could it be for several years. But while we hope that eventually some worthy biography shall appear to assist Catholicism in England, it may be of value not only to the future biographer but to those who will be built up or 'edified' by the example of a great priest to outline one aspect of Fr. Fressanges's life.

He was ordained by Bishop Youens in the last days of 1936, so that his life as a priest lasted just over seven years. The first six months were spent as a curate at Sheringham, where there was not very wide scope for his inexhaustible vitality; the remaining six and a half years he spent at Norwich. During that time he was never more than a curate, being on the eve of receiving a parish of his own when he met his death. The achievement of so short and limited a priestly career is one of the most inspiring aspects of a phenomenal life.

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One of the most needed applications of the doctrine of Christ's mystical Body is that of co-operation among the members of that Body. The interdependence of all the members was emphasised from the beginning by St. Paul when he wrote of the head and the feet needing each other (Cf. Pius XII's Encyclical on the Mystical Body, §42, C.T.S. Trans.). It is obvious that the strength of the Church depends on this cohesion of all her parts and that the actions of the hierarchy are of little value without the support of the laity, and still more the other way about. Pius XI based his appeal for Catholic

Action on this fundamental idea of the Church, and yet in spite of all that has been done in this respect true co-operation between clergy and laity has often been lacking when most needed. Spheres of influence are unconsciously marked out; the laity become suspicious of the intrusion of the priest, and often the priest is irritated by 'lay interference.' The priest whose life is dedicated to the service of the common life of the people is sometimes more 'anti-laical' than his most recalcitrant parishioner is anti-clerical. Catholic movements are too often hampered by the isolation of the different members of the Church, and in particular the parish is too often regarded as a circle of spokes coming from the same hub. That image may be true of the sacramental contact of the priest with every individual of his parish, but the life of the cell of the mystical Body must be integral and therefore social. As it lives by an intricate series of relations between all the members, it is a weakness, not a strength, in the central authority to be unable to share its power with as many members as possible.

Fr. Fressanges's first concern as a priest was for the full development of the mystical Body in the radius of his influence. He had himself built his life on the doctrine. He once admitted that he found it possible always to preach on some point or application of it, and those who heard his compelling sermons will testify to his success. The co-operation of Catholics who understand this unity will function both in doctrine and in good works, i.e. in faith and morals. First, in the matter of good works, Fr. Fressanges stood ready for any one in need at all times, but his works of mercy never took on that personal quality that leads to exclusiveness. The more well-to-do members of the parish he encouraged to assist the poorer, not in an aloof, purely business way through the priest, but through direct personal contact. They were asked to take special care and interest in this or that household in difficulties. He would ask a parishioner perhaps to interest himself in more than one poor family when that was possible. He kept in touch with both the helped and the helper so that resources of time and material should not be taken for granted by the former or restricted by the latter. He would never allow need, spiritual or material, to remain unnoticed among the people. In this way he laid the foundation for a common pooling of parochial resources under the guidance of the virtues of mercy and charity so as to avoid institutionalism or the prying interference characteristic of some State welfare work.

In this he was largely inspired by the ideal of the Little Sisters of the Assumption with whose work in the parish he enthusiastically co-operated. It was their foundation upon which he built. For

besides nursing the sick poor these Sisters associate with themselves in their work men and women who are better off and who make the convent the centre of their works of mercy. The 'Lady Servants of the Poor' follow a rule that trains them as apostles by forming in them the ground of a deeply Christian life and giving them a share in the work among the poor and destitute. The 'Decurions' form the association of men who do the same sort of work, helping the poor by their prayers and advice as well as by good works and alms. This is one of the most well-founded forms of co-operation. Working thus in harmony with the religious within the parish is of course one of the practical means of 'building up' the Body of Christ, but one which is often missed through strange though explicable misunderstandings. Fr. Fressanges had spent four years in the Dominican Order, which he had to leave with the deepest regret on account of ill-health; but this experience of religious life gave him an advantage here. There was much that he could give the Sisters in this respect, such as his conferences full of that precious quality of understanding and experience of their state. But the practical experience of co-operation within the parish which he derived from this particular sisterhood was more than recompense for his personal service to them. Priest and sisters together worked towards a practical realisation of the early Christians' way of life in holding all things in common. On these lines the whole parish can become a community; priest, religious and laity living for one thing and as one thing in Christ.

Secondly, in the doctrinal field, where the parochial clergy hold their official position in the *Ecclesia docens*, co-operation requires more tact and precision if interference is to be avoided. But in these days the laity must assist the clergy in this in order to reach the non-Catholic world around. The conversion of England would be quite out of the question if it depended on the apostolic work of the priests alone; they require the organised assistance of the laity, such as is to be found in the recent Guild of catechists set up in the archdiocese of Birmingham. Such a guild plays a recognised part in the Magisterium of the Church, and in Norwich a similar method of co-operation was made possible by the formation of a Study Circle on the lines of an Aquinas Society. Fr. Fressanges gathered a group of enthusiastic students of both sexes, of all ages, from all sections of the community, under the patronage of St. Thomas Aquinas, and one of its sources of strength was the prayer to the saint at the beginning of each meeting and the annual sung, or even High, Mass on the saint's feast day. He was always careful to provide for the spiritual needs of the group which he moulded on

the doctrine of the Mystical Body. At one time he ran a course of lectures on this doctrine, gathering experts from many directions to come and talk to the circle on this mystery of the Church.

Fr. Fressanges's own contributions to the circle were catholic and profound, but he did not as a rule read papers to them. His main purpose was to make the members work actively in the study circle and write the papers themselves. This was the form co-operation took in this field; together they worked at the subject in hand, he provided the suggestions, the books and the criticism. Together they studied thus the whole extent of the Church's teaching, including not only the essential doctrines that have to be 'covered' in a course of instruction, but the social doctrine of the papal encyclicals as well. Fr. Fressanges's bookshelves, which in spite of constant loans or gifts to others, were steadily increasing into an extensive and valuable library, were at the disposal of the circle. The members were thus able to become acquainted through his vivid exposition and his wide range of scientific and popular books with the truths of the Church.

This was no pleasant-social-evening discussion group; its effects were practical. The stream of converts into Fr. Fressanges's room on the ground floor of the presbytery was constant. The room was open to all who wished for advice or assistance or who merely needed cheering-up (the room infact might be called the power station of local co-operation),<sup>1</sup> but more especially was it frequented by those he was preparing for membership in the Church. Its mantelpiece was celebrated on all sides for its use as a blackboard to illustrate anything from original sin to the industrial revolution. Soon the Study Circle was able to take over some of this work, and by careful selection and grouping of instructors and instructed, according to diversity of gifts and attainments, an effective method of preparing up to fifteen people at once for the sacraments was established. The priest held an enquiry, almost an examination, at the end of the course after having kept in touch with the progress of the catechumen; but the actual work of instructing was carried on by members of the Circle. There was no doubt that this was the priest's sphere, but the laity provided him with an invaluable instrument for the prosecution of his work.

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There are, however, as St. Thomas shows, an infinite number of potential members of the Mystical Body, those who are not actually or visibly united with the Church. Many priests find their time

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<sup>1</sup> See Note at the end of this article.

entirely occupied with the actual and visible members, others, more regrettably, are content to preach to the converted and to administer the sacraments to those who come within the walls of their churches. They seldom meet a non-Catholic except superficially. Yet the social status of the priest, quite apart from the impelling force of the Gospels, should thrust him into frequent contact with the non-Catholics of his district. His Catholicism makes it possible for him to approach all, be they Jews or Jehovah's Witnesses, and his standing in local affairs derives from his being necessarily the leader of the Catholics of the locality. The need for co-operation here has been emphasised often by the present Holy Father.

Some time before the inauguration of the Sword of the Spirit Fr. Fressanges had been in close contact with the leaders of the other Christian bodies in Norwich. He found such good will and unanimity on fundamental social matters that he began to think in terms of a Christian Party on the lines of a 'Centre Party.' But—easily persuaded of the danger of such a political body—he quickly turned his attention to the re-Christianising of local government on a non-party basis. This could be achieved through the co-operation of all sincere Christians in enunciating Christian principles for local members and local electors. Seeking some sort of ground plan Fr. Fressanges in July, 1940, came across Captain Curd's summary of Catholic social teaching, 'Towards a Christian Social Order,' and he presented this to the Anglicans and Nonconformists, who accepted it as a starting point for discussion and common work. An inaugural meeting by special invitation was attended by three hundred people, a representative gathering—heads of schools, doctors, civil servants, many town councillors, and five or six aldermen. They decided to encourage justice and charity in local affairs, to provide something worth fighting for and something to build on in future reconstruction. A continuation committee was set up and a series of discussion-lectures on various aspects of local government by experts was conducted with success. During the debate that followed the lecture much common ground was tilled.

The continuation committee, composed of half a dozen representatives of the three Christian groups, worked out the points on which all were agreed, and the priests and ministers took back to their respective co-religionists these results in their proper context. Thus a vague 'reunion all round' was excluded. Here again the Study Circle proved its value, since the majority of the Catholic members of the continuation committee had been trained there and so possessed a working knowledge of the Church's social teaching. In such a committee this was a priceless asset. The committee issued

as a result of its combined work a report on Housing, which was printed and distributed in the district.

It can be said, without offence to any, that Fr. Fressanges with his great abilities was the pivot of all this co-operation. The others admitted that they could have made little headway together without this Catholic mediation. As an example—'public houses': the Non-conformists objected to their presence in the local schemes, and it looked as though there was not much chance of agreement on this fairly important point until Fr. George's eloquence had brought home the distinction between a 'beer house,' purely for drinking with no amenities; and the true 'pub' providing a meeting place or club where much local government can be worked out in the raw. He was able to show that Norwich had been provided with attractive public houses which were places rather of constructive social gatherings than dens of vice.

As with all his other work of this sort, Fr. Fressanges was beginning to withdraw his personal part in the movement, following his ideal that the priest is essential to his people in the 'sacramental' relationship, but in the other spheres their part is more independent. In this case it was more difficult to avoid dependence on his own personal gifts, but 'Towards . . . ' has so far survived.<sup>2</sup> One of the main sources of its continued strength lies in the co-operation of prayer, for from the very beginning before the first meeting Fr. Fressanges had enlisted the help of many of the contemplative communities in England. He was able to draw up a list of 'The Vanguard of the "Towards . . . ,"' composed of twenty-five communities who were offering weekly conventual Mass, or daily Vespers, Matins and Lauds or Prime. Rightly he regarded this truly remarkable support as the mainstay of the movement, which was thus rooted in the fruitful soil of the prayers of the members of the Church, the common life of prayer.

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An element in the doctrine of the Mystical Body expressing the Catholic attitude to creation is what might be called the 'incarnational' value of all good things, drawing materially good things in some way into the Body as, for example, in the liturgy. Our Lord said he would draw all *things* to him on the Cross, and the priest at Mass assists in this drawing for his own locality. Thus not only should he provide vitality for his own flock, he should also be able to draw into the influence of the grace-giving Cross all the good

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. the tribute in *The Catholic Worker*, March, 1944.

things and the beautiful. The mystery of the Spirit, the inner life of the Body must dominate. Too often the material things become merely a drag or distraction: clubs, dances, whist drives, canteens, collections and bazaars, these are not brought within the spiritualising influence of the Body but remain disintegrating external works, relaxations or diversions, or necessary evils. Drama, music, food, or dances, all these things can be used moderately, i.e. virtuously. The Spirit can dominate them, so that they too may co-operate in the Common Life. The common life of the Body of Christ is not exclusively spiritual but includes all things true, good and beautiful.

In this respect the most outstanding achievement of Fr. Fressanges's career was the Corpus Christi Pageant played on June 30th, 1938, in St. Andrew's Hall, the former Dominican Church in Norwich. The Pageant symbolised the common life in a hundred ways: the return in mime of the Eucharist to the secularised church, the symbolism of the Eucharist itself—shown from Melchisedech through the Nativity and the Last Supper to Wenceslas and Thomas Aquinas—above all the co-operation of all the gifts for music, drama, costume, and the like, brought by the living members of the Body . . . Fr. Fressanges outlined the theme in a Foreword to the Programme: 'St. Paul delved into every nook and cranny of the culture at his command to capture hostages for Christ with which to win the mind of Imperial Rome . . . "to the Greeks and to the Barbarians am I become a debtor.'" In our effort to produce this Pageant that phrase of the Apostle has been our text. The purpose that we had in planning a Corpus Christi play was to express an Act of Faith in God's Greatest Gift to mankind by colour, speech, music, mime. . . gathering from every source the treasured legacy of creative man, Bach, Handel, . . . Plainsong. Our achievement is certain to fall far short of the ideal that we saw in the inception of the Pageant. That need be no tragedy. The essence of right gift-giving is in the intention and sincerity of the heart. This Pageant is *our* gift to the Blessed Sacrament and when we speak we do so, with your permission, in the name of Norwich and East Anglia. Please keep one fact in mind. The Pageant is no mere spectacle. The audience is as much part of the gift-giving as actors or choir. Hence the invitation to join in the final 'O. Salutaris Hostia' is no whimsical courtesy but should be the Signature of Your Co-operation.' The effect of this communal act of faith was tremendous, and he was urged to produce others. The preparations for an even more ambitious one were well advanced when the war came in the autumn of 1939 to wreck this gift-giving.

Fr. Fressanges was a close friend of many artists and actors. He became closely acquainted with members of the Polish Ballet when they visited Norwich in the earlier part of the war. As a priest he was of course unable to attend the theatre, but his knowledge of dramatic art made this seem hardly credible. He entered with contagious energy and enthusiasm into all the jollifications, outings and parties of his people, but never did the apostolic aim of the priest cease to dominate his share in these good things: there was always somebody to be helped through thus receiving the goods gifts of the Father who has made all things good. Above all he was capable of intense and profound friendship; yet the evil of exclusiveness that so often militates against the common life in a particular friendship was overcome by the universality of charity. On the contrary he made a point of 'sharing' his friends and still more his beloved parents in a way that is unknown except in a man who knows what is meant by the common love of charity, the bond of union. One of the most remarkable features of his friendships was the number of priests who were gathered within this union. This was an application of the order of charity within the Body of Christ, as those who have most in common have the more reason for living and loving in common. It is a strange anomaly that some priests should become isolated not only from their own flocks but from their fellow shepherds, an anomaly not resolved by a hearty and superficial *bonhomie* which sometimes gives the union of priests the (for them) unhealthy air of a club or trade union. About seventy priests gathered for the Requiem of this young priest and there were many others whose presence was prevented only by such obstacles as distance. This was in itself a witness to a very active 'edification' of the Body of Christ, and it need hardly be added that it was the harmonious co-operation with his fellow curates and above all the sympathy and encouragement of his parish priest that made his pastoral work possible.

Although the work of Christ on earth sanctifies and ennobles all the good things of creation and draws them into his service, it is primarily in overcoming evil and suffering that it is manifest. 'Dying on the Cross he bestowed on his Church the boundless treasures of Redemption without any co-operation on her part,' says Pius XII, 'but in the distribution of that treasure he not only shares this work of sanctification with his spotless Bride, but wills it to arise in a certain manner out of her labour' (42). The priest must of necessity be in this too an *alter Christus* in bearing the sufferings of his people and his own. His daily Sacrifice is the centre of this filling up of the Passion of Christ, but springing from that source it flows out every-day into every sin and suffering that lurks among the people. Co-



operation in suffering means sympathy, a suffering-with, a dying-with Christ and thus releasing Christ's grace upon souls. The common life lived in the vale of tears will be full of common sin and suffering overcome and transformed through the power of the Spirit. The parish where evil is not borne in company is a diseased cell in the Body of Christ.

Sin is overcome not simply by the exercise of the power of the keys in the confessional, but in tracking down the sinner and winning him back through gentle or stern persuasion. Of this activity little can as yet be said in the life of Fr. Fressanges. It is sufficient to know that his patience and untiring zeal, always tempered by gentleness, won over many 'hard cases.' And he used to say that he would never regard his confessional as an 'absolution machine.' He insisted on timely advice; often a sinner would be startled into more fervent contrition; at other times the timid would find quiet strength and comfort.

Suffering he transformed as the minister of Christ and dispenser of the daily sacrifice. He had much personal suffering and disappointment in his life, such as having to leave the Dominican Order to which he was so devoted. This gave him a great sympathy and love for the 'underdog,' a characteristic of all great priests. One of the most outstanding examples was his adoption of the Polish cause, as that of a dispossessed and exiled Catholic people whose suffering has been greater than any in this war. Not only did he go out of his way to befriend them on every occasion, relieving hard worked Polish chaplains in the Air-force, bringing homeless Poles to the presbytery or introducing them to his friends so that they might find a home in England, but he even learnt their language so as to be able to minister to them more sympathetically and completely. He once travelled across England to tend a Polish pilot who had been involved in an accident. One of his last and most striking contributions to BLACKFRIARS was to champion their cause.

At home in his parish the hospital was almost a second presbytery to him. He was there at all hours of night or day. He would sleep on the floor of his living room downstairs in order to be near the phone for sick calls. The matron and nurses would send for him not only to perform his priestly duties but also to act as nurse. There were some appalling cases of agony, an airman mangled in a crash for example, only to be dealt with by this priest. For hours through the night he would support the sufferer in his arms; he would teach the patient how to bear it or to face death in company with our Lord. The suffering of these men did indeed become his own. The sick tended by the Little Sisters of the Assumption received no less care

and love. He would never hesitate to give up any enjoyment, relaxation or sleep to assist these wounded members of Christ.

His former parish priest, Mgr. Canon Squirrel, who had done so much to provide scope for these great talents, referred in the panegyric to the young priest's devotion to the Mass. That was in fact the mainspring of his priestly power of co-operation in the common life. The life is indeed common, common to all those who step under the Cross to receive over them the flood of the life blood of Christ. The priest unlocks the flood gates of this stream at every Mass, and the members of the Body ministered by the priest are given new life through the new flowing of the stream. The supernatural life is one and therefore common to priest and people; but beyond the bare minimum of official participation in this life, the priest's co-operation with his people can always achieve a closer binding of the bonds of unity, building up the Body always more securely.

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There were many other qualities and gifts that should have been included even in this limited account of the priest and his labours. Something should have been said in particular of Fr. Fressanges spiritual life of prayer and asceticism from which his zeal and charity sprang, of his ceaseless desire to find a refuge from the world as a hermit on some secluded island, of his conviction of the importance of the land and how he planned to start a Catholic group in some district denuded of the sacraments where he could bring back the Mass to the countryside. There are high lights too here omitted—his speaking to the Anglican diocesan Synod, his conducting of Services in local factories on Good Friday, and also his Hellenic tour that gave him such inspiration. No adequate idea of those six and a half years can be given in a brief paper, not even of this one aspect of the Common Life. Let this only be a sign post directing attention to one who knew how to walk in company in the City of God.

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.

NOTE—

During the war the most frequent visitors to his room were members of the Forces of every sort so that for his last Christmas he received 300 cards from these men scattered all over the world. As this universality of charity is the foundation of the doctrine whence this inspiration flowed we quote from a letter by one closely associated with this work in the earlier years of the war: 'The main theme of his life was soldiers. He used to seek out every remote camp in Norfolk, and was almost daily going out to them in the 'Jade' (his minute and ancient two-seater car) to hear confessions and say Mass for them. Many mornings in the week he would be off at the crack

of dawn to some outlying place, and be back again for his parish Mass at 7 a.m. The work he did with isolated soldiers when chaplains were scarce was tremendous. I remember his coming back quite radiant one morning saying 'I've had 100 per cent. Communions today'—and this was not unusual. He was always in the Jade or on the bicycle. There was not a bye-lane in Norfolk he did not know. And of course all these men came into Norwich in their time off, and all gravitated to his room. Here Miss Annie (the house-keeper) helped him tremendously in giving him the run of the kitchen, for the making of the constant tea or cocoa and scratch meals. The extent of his influence amongst the soldiers has been testified to by the great quantity of letters he received from chaplains in all parts overseas—many of them unknown to him—who had come in contact with some of 'Fr. George's Boys.' I think I am correct in saying it was nearly 100. Certainly the soldiers who had the privilege of coming within his influence were so greatly enriched by it, that however much they may slip away in the future I am certain they will never forget. I don't think anyone who had known Fr. George was ever quite the same afterwards. . . . He had the power of mixing the seemingly unmixable. He would bring along Private Jim Smith of Paradise Row and introduce him with just as much enthusiasm as if he was presenting some famous or exciting personality. And as a result he received the same enthusiasm . . .

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CHURCH, STATE AND LETTERS. By F. Brompton Harvey. 'THINGS WHICH ABIDE. By Raymond Abba. (Epworth Press; 6s. each.)

Of the excellent and varied essays which make up the first of these books, the most welcome is that on 'The Necessity of the Church.' It would only need slight adjustment to be made the preface of an English treatise *De Ecclesia*, and even in its present state deserves to be studied carefully by those who are trying to promote a Christian education free from 'denominationalism.' Here is Methodism at its best: in religion, the rediscovery of what was lost at the Reformation; in culture, the recognition of the noble aspirations of a civilisation unconsciously awaiting the coming of Christ and of the subsequent necessity to rejudge all things in the light of His revelation.

Mr. Abba in a series of sermons propounds simply, but vividly and firmly, some of the great dogmatic truths. He, too, asserts roundly that the New Testament knows nothing of a Christianity apart from the Church. It is, however, unfortunate that he should have had recourse to the myth of the walled-up nun, when there are other examples of the meaning of totalitarianism, more firmly based on historical fact.

E.Q