

CHAPTER SIX

Charles Alfred Billington



The entries in the Register for Charles Billington's first Sunday at S.Faith's set the pattern for his incumbency. There were 56 at 8 o'clock but 75 took communion at 10.45; the marginal note reads, 'General Communion at Sung Eucharist commences.' From then, onwards it became the rule for the great majority of those present at what became thought of as the family service of the church to go up to the altar to receive communion or, in the case of the unconfirmed of all ages, a blessing. From that date, too, the numbers at the early celebration inevitably declined and those at mid-morning built up to produce the pattern to which we are accustomed today. There came, too, an increasing participation by the laity in the services of the church. Over a period of years, and in some cases accompanying the introduction of new service forms, came such things as laymen reading the lesson and on occasion the Gospel, leading the intercessions, or the Evensong prayers, taking up the bread, wine and water, choosing the hymns, asking questions during the sermon and taking part in dialogues and discussions. S.Faith's was catching up fast with the Liturgical Movement — and there was a lot of ground to make up. Not all the decisions made were smoothly made or without controversy and dissension, but although some objected and a few departed, the majority soon accepted these innovations. Another new move was the establishing of regular weekday evening celebrations of the Eucharist: their ultimate success is reflected in the fact that in 1975 the Thursday evening celebration is almost always the best-attended midweek one, often attracting between twenty and thirty. Fr.Charles' first Patronal Festival saw also the first Sung Mass on that day, with Robert Runcie of Cuddesdon celebrating and preaching. And soon after the Sunday Schools ceased to function at their traditional time of 3 p.m. on Sundays and instead began to operate in parallel with the morning service, their members coming in to share in the worship soon after the sermon.

The magazines reflect the upheavals and new enthusiasms of this hectic time. The Warden's Notes 'rejoiced at the prospect of such a varied and stimulating range of activities planned for us, from the youngest to the oldest, by Father Charles.' Redecoration of the Hall is mooted, Jim Burgess' welcome return to office as Verger is noted, explanations are given by the Vicar of the new Sunday Congregational evenings of hymn-singing, and learning of new tunes and settings, and the Vicar talks for the first time of Nave Altars and microphones. He accepts the resignation of Mr. Ernest Pratt, organist and choirmaster for many years, and prints a thoughtful letter from him in which he says, 'the kind of hymn tunes which are being introduced, and the Service setting which it is proposed to introduce, are not among the most worthy forms of offering at our disposal and I therefore cannot, as a matter of conscience, implicitly encourage them by rehearsal and performance.' He was referring to the Appleford Mass setting and the Twentieth Century Light Music Group's hymns by such writers as Appleford and Fr.Beaumont.

Before Mr. Pratt's departure at the end of the year there had been 250 at Fr. Charles' first Christmas Midnight. Mr. Gerald Brown replaced Mr. Pratt in January, and the numbers communicating at 10.45 a.m. began to creep up into the 80's and 90's. On occasion, and for the first time in the history of S.Faith's, they topped a hundred. That Lent saw more new things. There was an evening Sung Eucharist on Maundy Thursday and a Low Mass on Good Friday morning: this latter a cause of continuing controversy. And in the early hours of Easter we experienced the Vigil, Lighting of the Paschal Candle, Baptism and High Mass — new both to S.Faith's and the whole area. This followed an ecumenical Lent Course 'The People Next Door', in which for the first time many of the congregation met regularly with members of Waterloo Baptist Church and SS.Peter and Paul's Roman Catholic church to study together and to experience life not just outside our denomination but also the church as a whole. Other innovations in 1967 were the first known public use of incense, at the Easter Midnight (how Mr. Wise and his followers would have enjoyed that!), the introduction of women to the choir to help meet the perennial shortage of boys, and the use of the Stations of the Cross service in Holy Week. Articles in the Parish News defended and justified these and other changes the new Vicar had made and regretted that some had left and that others had remained to criticise.

That Summer Evensong began to change from its seventy year pattern. The congregation, whose numbers had been falling slowly but steadily for

many years, was confined — none too readily in some cases — to the front rows of the Nave: later they were to move to the Choir. The 10.45 service was brought forward to 10.30 so that there would be time afterwards for a cup of tea. This soon became coffee and a regular institution. And so Fr. Charles' first year was over. By now Sunday 8 a.m. figures were at about 25 and mid-morning at about 90; there were three midweek celebrations including a movable evening one. On September 24th 'Mass' replaced Evensong on Sunday for the first time ever; two weeks later a major campaign and the presence of the Archdeacon of Liverpool produced 191 communicants at S.Faith's Day evening High Mass (now so termed). It also saw the arrival of Mr. Patrick Fitzgerald to replace Mr. Gerald Brown upon the latter's appointment to the Cathedral Choir and, a week after this, the first use of the new series two Holy Communion service. Sunday evenings in the Register begin to look highly individual now: successive Sundays in Advent 1967 read 'Youth Club Service', 'Compline', 'Congregational Evening' and 'Musical Meditation on Christ. mass'. This latter is still spelt thus occasionally, and 'Remembrance' Sunday invariably thus mis-spelt. The October magazine, a special Patronal Festival issue of 24 pages, contained messages from three previous priests of S.Faith's, including Mr. Schofield. He recalled happy years at S.Faith's and lasting friendships made, and said: 'I think I can truly say that I have never loved any other church as much as I love S.Faith's.' Another who has given so much to S.Faith's, Jim Burgess, also contributed some memories of the past to the issue. He recalled 'an emissary from another church' intercepting him one evening outside S.Faith's and offering him another pound a week for an easier job if he would desert. He didn't, of course, despite such ordeals as stepping into four feet of water one pitch dark morning in the notorious boiler house.

The year ended with warning of the likely arrival of a Curate after many years, and 1968 began. During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Fr. John Kennedy signed in from S. Edmund's Roman Catholic Church to preach at a Unity Service: the first recorded signatory from that denomination in the church's history. That season also saw what was probably the biggest upheaval in the life of S.Faith's since Mr. Bentley-Smith's great Sung Eucharist controversy. After much debate and meeting, and 'for an experimental period' pews at the front of the church were removed and a temporary altar (actually the frontal cupboard in disguise) placed below the Chancel steps. Henceforward the 10.30 service was conducted from here, with communicants on three sides (and, for a period, pews as well) and the celebrant behind and facing down the church. History

records that in due time, and like most other S.Faith's experiments the temporary became the permanent and the fine platform, altar and rails at which we worship today were professionally made and installed. Just before the experiment began the Bishop of Liverpool, now Stuart Blanch, preached and confirmed to a full church on Mothering Sunday; the 175 communicants established a new record as probably did the amazing sum of £96 received in collections. An article at this time in the Parish News and entitled 'of Altars, Ropes, New Tunes and Series Two' struck a familiar note in trying to put these controversial but essentially internal preoccupations in the rightful context' of the 'church's call to mission to the world outside. The Vicar reported from a Holiday Camp; the July issue was printed 'June 1968' and later claimed to be an attempt to make S.Faith's look ahead of the times; newcomers wrote poems about the warm welcome they had received when joining the church: in fact the magazine buzzed, as it has continued to buzz intermittently ever since with the clergy's and the laity's views. In the registers the new pattern began to stabilise, broken as usual by odd items of interest. There was the first High Mass for Corpus Christi; the inscrutable entry 'Taxi' under 'Preacher' one Sunday evening Sung Mass; services were cancelled to make way for Parish Outings to S. Paul's Tranmere and S. Luke's Southport for their Patronal Festivals; a 'Special Mass with Holy Unction' took place and there was a new record of 250 10.45 a.m. communicants when the Bishop of Warrington celebrated and confirmed one December Sunday. And of course that year also saw the arrival of the first Curate at S.Faith's for seven years: the Revd. David Emery, living in 16, Alder Grove and making possible an increase to four weekday celebrations.

The main preoccupation in church and magazine in 1969 was the Nave Altar controversy. In several articles Fr. Charles explained and defended his policy in making the experiment and then lobbying vigorously for a permanent installation. He saw the issue as part of the whole policy of worship in which he believed and he insisted that it should be seen this way. 'I have been moved to see that, according to the Light I have received, one of our first objectives was to make the 10.45 a.m. service *not* for a selective High Church few but for an ordinary family who might drop into S.Faith's. The Nave Altar I see as a vital part of that objective.' The Curate gave support with articles about the 'New Reformation' and Canon Naylor addressed a meeting on the subject. The final stage was reached when, after the morning service on June 8th, the congregation voted by a margin of 65 to 23 for retaining the Nave Altar, a decision subsequently confirmed by the P.C.C. The Great Debate was over: the Referendum had been held.



The Nave Altar

It had been punctuated by preparations for what can only be called a Whit Spectacular, a service entered in the Register under the unique name of 'The Power and the Glory and the Eucharist of the Holy Spirit.' It lasted two and a half hours and featured a bewildering variety of component parts. The Bishop of Liverpool preached, pop musicians performed, a Pentecostalist Anglican spoke of the Spirit and, under the direction of Jill Brown, wife of a local Congregationalist minister, twelve men mimed the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and, in so doing, gave considerable food for thought to late passers-by as, at midnight and clad in sheets, they crept round from the hall to the porch to make their entry. There were 200 communicants (a suspiciously round figure) at this unrepeatably event, and they contributed to a record of 302 for Whit Sunday. A few weeks before more new ground had been broken as most of the congregation went to S.John's, Waterloo to share their morning worship and return a visit made earlier to S.Faith's. Soon after, Evensong was transferred into the Sanctuary for a 'trial period' that inevitably became permanent. Numbers at both ends on Sundays had steadily fallen (at this time perhaps a dozen at 8 and choir-plus-twenty or so at 6) while there were usually over a hundred communicants now at a 'normal' Sunday morning main service. More newcomers remarked in the 'Parish News' on the new relaxed and informal atmosphere at S.Faith's, combining happy informality in personal relationships with the due maintenance of dignity and beauty in worship.

The year saw other unusual services, some of them unusually timed. At about 5.45 p.m. on All Saints Day (a Saturday) a Sung Mass was held 'at conclusion of Church Bazaar'; two weeks later a 'Top Ten Hymns Evening' replaced Evensong. History records that, despite seventy years of the English Hymnal and two years of intensively canvassed 'Twentieth Century Supplement', the clear

winner was none other than 'Onward Christian Soldiers', followed by 'Jerusalem', 'Dear Lord and Father of Mankind' and 'Guide me, O thou Great Redeemer' to Cwm Rhondda! And so into the nineteen seventies.

Father Charles had promised that the Nave Altar would be the last major innovation for the time being, and 1970 was thus less controversial. It saw the institution of the 'Meeting of the Church' — the gathering of those concerned with parish visiting and mission — after a monthly Thursday evening Eucharist featuring free prayer from the congregation and the laying-on of hands in blessing. There was Any Questions in place of Mothering Sunday Evensong and on Passion Sunday the 10.45 finally became the 10.30. That Maundy Thursday there was the first Washing of the Feet at the evening Sung Eucharist (90 communicants and 24 feet). At S.Faithside, Bishop Mark Way returned to preach and dedicate the Nave Altar. The seventieth anniversary of the church was commemorated at the same time but only, as it were, in passing; April 21st itself had, oddly, not featured a service of any kind to mark the day. Two final events soon followed: Mr.Fitzgerald's last day as organist, and Fr.David Emery's as Curate. In the months that followed Fr.Charles made what is probably the oddest entry ever in the Register, a 'Special Low Mass in Freshfield Pinewoods' for the benefit of Confirmation candidates who, on an elaborately planned expedition on the eve of their Confirmation, were surprised to stumble upon the family of S.Faith's worshipping in, a hollow. At the Confirmation, with Bishop John Bickersteth, the new Bishop of Warrington, and now of Bath and Wells, there were 270 communicants and 'about 400 in church', this latter being practically the first guess at actual numbers attending at S.Faith's in all its years.

Just before Christmas Dennis Richard Bury signs in as Curate and Nigel McCulloch, Chaplain of Christ's College, Cambridge and another old friend of S.Faith's, preached at midnight. The 'Parish News' reflects a few other events of the year. During it Fr.Hassall had died, and a tribute by Derek Clawson said much about him, his last years with us, and about what had happened since his departure, and put these things into perspective.

'It was sad to see his last years at S.Faith's, cruelly struck down and a shadow of the man he was - . . . Much of what he stood for is changed now. But then he was a man of his generation, and we cannot blame him for that. As to whether his 'transcendental' view of worship or the more modern 'immanent' view is the better, we cannot tell: we stand too close to the change over to know. Perhaps his character can be

best summed up by the wish he often expressed about his ashes if he were to die at S.Faith's. "Bury them," he used to say, "where the servers stand when the Gospel is read. I can act as a marker." He wanted to be useful even when he was dead.'

Another article that month records the passing of Mother Maribel of Wantage, sculptor of the 'Rabbit Madonna' in the Lady Chapel. This unusual group bears the identifying inscription CSMV (Community of S.Mary the Virgin) on its base. Later the Vicar states that, barring an invitation to become the first Bishop of the Moon, he aims to stay happy among us for quite some time yet; proving thus that although he may often have been a visionary, he was not always a prophet.



Fr Charles and the church group in 1969.

For 1971 was to be Fr.Charles' last full year at S.Faith's. It opened with a welcome to our current organist, Mr. Graham Atherton, who joined us in January. The month appropriately ended with the launching of the Organ Appeal as well as one of the numerous Parish POrse Appeals that all churches specialise in these days. Candlemas was marked by a moving and beautiful candle-light High Mass and Lent saw 'Worship with a Difference' on Sunday evenings. Music with a difference was provided on the weekend of March 14th, when S.Faith's staged a Musical Marathon. For two days and a night a rota of congregation and friends, accompanied by various organists and pianists, sang their way continuously through a lot of Hymns Ancient and Modern, good, bad and indifferent. They were refreshed through the long watches of the night, found the occasion exhausting but memorable, and helped to raise over £100 towards the target of some £600. Since those busy months, our organist has built and maintained an increasingly high musical standard and shown a most valuable liturgical sense. Despite many difficulties he has succeeded in providing a fine and fitting musical setting for our worship.

That June Mr. George Houldin, who had been ill for some time, left to live in Formby and end an association with S.Faith's through much of its history. The same month Dennis Bury, our 'temporary' Curate was made priest in Liverpool Cathedral, but the Easter and Whitsun Midnight services both dropped in numbers. During the year the Sunday Evening 'Sung Mass' became 'Evening Communion', reintroducing the word to the Registers. That S.Faith's Day welcomed Bishop Baker, the Gloriana Brass Ensemble and Miss Annette Cull as horn soloist, but only 95 communicants. An oddity in December is a 7.15 p.m. weekday Sung Mass: 'Votive of the Holy Spirit, attended by guests at Myles Davies' 21st Birthday Celebrations' (in the Hall,

afterwards). Myles, priested in 1975, in just one of a steady and remarkable stream of ordinands whom S.Faith's has produced over the years, and, seemingly, in increasing numbers: to anticipate the future, the present incumbent, who is also Deanery Warden of Ordinands, has four in the parish in 1975. Back now in 1971, Nicolas Alldrit (another from our ranks to take Orders) warned in a magazine article of the dangers of 'multitudinism', of counting heads and acting as if the church existed merely to fill its pews and justify the science of statistics. The present author might feel chastened were he not a firm believer in the value of historical records and their interest as a guide to patterns of worship and to liturgical fashions. , Unrepentantly he records that at the end of the year, and for the first time, communicants topped the ten thousand mark.

It might nevertheless be fitting to suspend statistics for a while, at least until Easter. During Lent 1972 Mr. Archie Pattison functioned as Reader for the first time, and the approaching departure of Charles Billington was upon us. In the February magazine he had announced his reasons for accepting two country livings in Bedfordshire. His son Chad needed a move to a better climate than that of Merseyside, and he himself, as he explained at one of the Parish Dinners he had instituted, and in a Farewell Speech, felt that the time had come to move on while the parish was strong and happy and he had achieved his main objectives here. His final Lent was memorable: it culminated in a farewell party and presentation after Easter Day Festal Evensong and closed with 61 communicants on Easter Monday at 10.30 a.m. as Charles Alfred Billington signed the book for the last time and left S.Faith's for the parishes of Harrold and Carlton with Chellington. A large number of the congregation followed him for his induction and some visited him regularly in the months and years ahead.

The plethora of innovations and happenings recorded

above speak for themselves and for the priest who introduced them. If Fr.Hassall had, through his energy and devotion, added immeasurably to the furnishings and the internal beauty of S.Faith's, and preserved and enhanced its traditional image and role, Fr.Charles had in a few short years brought it into the world of the 1970's. Controversial, vulnerable, stubborn and lovable, he suffered from a personality cult that he publicly disowned but of which he was doubtless privately proud, and doubtless S.Faith's was the better for it. He totally revolutionised the pattern of our worship and made us revalue ourselves and our contribution to the church; he brought the concept of family worship to the forefront and made S.Faith's for the first time for very many years, if not for all time, a church for the parish and the family and not merely for the adherents of a particular party within Anglicanism. And he did all this without sacrificing Catholicism in its real sense; indeed hand in hand with the 'pop' hymns, his crooning into the new microphones, the children's 'nursery' in the noisy back pews, and the washing of the Maundy Thursday feet in the yellow plastic bowl, there was also the establishment of regular High Masses, of the use of incense, of the Stations of the Cross, of mysticism and of sacramental devotion. It is impossible fully to assess so diverse a man, and one to whom S.Faith's and I both owe so much; it is probably best merely to 'add that Charles Billington created the S.Faith's of the seventies, which is something for which I feel sure everyone in the congregation today feels continuing thankfulness.

Dennis Bury remained for the first months of this latest interregnum as priest-in-charge. We heard of the death of Fr.Schofield, watched the Everyman Theatre produce 'Murder in the Cathedral' in church, organised another 'Talents' scheme and finally said goodbye to Fr.Dennis as he left for Birmingham University. The last Whitsun Midnight to be held saw only 72 communicants, but featured the first known consumption of refreshments at the back of church afterwards (and punch, at that!). In June we experienced the first partial use of Series Three; in July Canon Edwyn Young of Liverpool Parish Church dedicated a new Visitors' Book, the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Hwfa Griffiths. For a week in August, and before Fr.Dennis' departure, there were no services of any sort between two Sundays: almost certainly the first time this had happened for some seventy years. The 'pure' interregnum that followed the departure of the priest-in-charge saw the maintenance of the normal Sunday services, and the Monday and Thursday midweeks. Celebrants during this period included several local vicars and old friends as well as others from further afield.

in September came the news of Mr. Houldin's death; an article in the 'Parish News' adds these memories of the man to the impression that the records give. 'I see him as an eloquent preacher . . . I see him, dark-haired, striding home from a service, surrounded by numerous cubs, all wanting to hold his hand. He had the power to hold us spellbound, as few people were able. He lived for S.Faith's, and I am sure that there are many who came under his influence who will always remember him with great affection, and be better for having known him.'

A link with the past had been broken, but the future was taking shape again. The usual mysterious negotiations between Wardens, Patrons and Bishop had, after one or two false starts, produced the promise of a new Vicar and then at last a date for his Induction. The Reverend Peter Goodrich, B.A., was to join us from S.Margaret's, Anfield. The arrangements for the Induction Service were finally made, the Bishop of Warrington and the Archdeacon of Liverpool introduced and handed over S.Faith's to its new Vicar (and vice versa), the Wardens sighed with relief, (as, no doubt, did the congregation), and, in the presence of 32 visiting clergy and about three hundred people, the interregnum ended and, on November 22nd, 1972 the Incumbency (spelt correctly at last) of Peter Goodrich began.