

A PRIEST IN THE CITY

When Father George Barry Ford resigned recently as pastor of Corpus Christi Church in Manhattan, there were hundreds of people of all faiths throughout the city who grasped the opportunity to pay tribute to him.

At a testimonial luncheon in the priest's honor Dr. Henry P. Van Dusen, President of Union Theological Seminary, which is next-door neighbor to Corpus Christi, described Father Ford as the best known and best loved man in the Morningside Heights community. Of course, many a parish priest throughout the nation is the best known and most beloved leader in his own community, but when you consider that the Morningside Heights area is the home of Columbia University, the Jewish Theological Seminary, Barnard and Teachers College, as well as Union Seminary, the compliment was not without very special meaning. As Dr. Van Dusen said, Father Ford's local standing is particularly remarkable in view of the fact that he has worked in a community which is full of the great, the near-great and the would-be great.

Father Ford's influence has long reached out far beyond the limits of Corpus Christi parish. For years he has been one of the leading citizens in New York who could be counted on to support a whole range of good causes. His prime public interests have been in Freedom House and The Church Peace Union where he has worked side by side with men of different faiths, but it would take a long listing to cover all the efforts he has made over the years to improve and strengthen the democratic heritage. It is probably significant that at the luncheon in his honor the room was crowded not only with distinguished personages but with many humble people too, each of whom could tell of some personal kindness, some extra half-mile that Father Ford walked in his behalf. The next day an editorial in the *New York Times* saluted him as one of the most admired figures in the city.

For years Father Ford was chaplain to Catholic students at Columbia University. He is still remembered there with vast admiration and gratitude. When the Halton affair erupted at Princeton, I was told by an eminent faculty figure that it would take several Father Haltons to undo the good that Father Ford did in winning respect for the Church on the Columbia campus, in dispelling antagonism to Catholicism and counteracting, by his sheer presence, the claim that Catholics are out of place in a free society or a free university.

As pastor of Corpus Christi Church, Father Ford was superb. He was intolerant of any slipshodness in

the divine services and the congregation responded accordingly. I do not know of any church or chapel in the world where the celebration of Mass is more impressive or more memorable. Under his guidance, Corpus Christi school became known throughout the nation as a model of elementary education.

Of course Father Ford has not always escaped criticism. A man of his temper would not want to; a man of his accomplishment could not hope to. He has always been just a step ahead of the crowd—a little more tolerant, a little more daring, a little less given to cant. It is even possible that from time to time he moved too fast—a happy enough fault in a society of people who move too slowly.

I do not know how many converts to the faith he has made. I feel quite confident that they are no fewer than they should be. I know something, though, about the Catholics struggling with problems of faith who have either come to him, or have been sent to him, and who came away strengthened in faith, comforted in spirit and ready to carry on.

At the testimonial luncheon, Dr. Van Dusen said jocularly that he was always nervous about having such a priest as Union Seminary's closest neighbor; he was never sure that Father Ford might not be luring his seminarians into the Catholic fold. Then he added, quite seriously, that if the Catholic Church has representatives more persuasive, he has never met one.

Father Ford is in a great tradition, a tradition carried on by some of the remarkable men in America, men who love New York not despite its vastness and crowded streets and impersonal air but because of it. New York is their town. They would feel stifled in any place less active or less intricate than this monster of a city. They know its rhythms, understand its beat, hear the music in its din. They love its people with their overly complex problems and unnecessary confusions. They feel alive in its sharp contrasts of rich and poor, beauty and ugliness, squalor and grandeur. They are men of the city, and if you are not a man of the city they will remain ever a mystery to you and the city they love will mostly offend you.

But I think Father Ford is one of them. And the recent outpouring of love for him in this New York that is supposed to be so cold and so impersonal was evidence again that the city knows and loves its own.

I met Father Ford on the street yesterday. Completely at home among the towering hotels of midtown, urbanely at ease with the mighty and humble alike, he walked past Grand Central Station as well-known and respected a figure as the curé in a Breton village—a man among his own.

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(*The Commonweal*, April 25, 1958)