

On 21st February, 1957, at St. Anthony's Hospital, North Cheam, in the Diocese of Southwark, in his seventieth year of age and forty-sixth of the priesthood

Father FREDERICK VINCENT COUCHE

fortified by the Sacraments of the Church, passed peacefully away. All his life long he suffered the disadvantage of a delicate constitution, and for the last twelve years of his life he was the victim of chronic gastric trouble which permitted him little rest, and to add to his cross in the last three years before his death he suffered acute angina pectoris, the pain increasing in intensity and frequency until finally he had a stroke which rendered him unconscious until the end. Thus an innocent and holy life came to an end, an end which characterized the whole life — no demonstration, no violent climax, no spectacular bedside behests or bequests, Frederick Couche gave his soul to God in his own unassuming and unobtrusive way, calling to mind the words of Scripture Don Bosco used so well in the *Companion of Youth*: "As a tree falls so shall it lie."

Frederick Couche was born in New Cross, London, on the feast of St. Aloysius, 21st June, 1886. His parents were Catholics of strong convictions — with them the Faith came first and they accepted without question all the restrictions it imposed upon them in a then strongly Protestant country. Frederick Couche's early schooling was received at Clapham College from the de la Salle Brothers, and his first contact with the Salesians was when as a boy of thirteen he came as a day-boy to the small secondary school the Salesians had established in the previous ten years at Battersea. In these early years he showed the seedling gifts of mind and heart which were to mark him out afterwards. He was already good at music, and his intelligence was high above the average. His gentle ways and innocent piety attracted the attention of his Rector, Father Macey, who encouraged him to think of the Salesian priesthood as his vocation, and in fact sent him to the Novitiate House at Burwash when he was only fifteen years of age. There he began his study of Philosophy and made his novitiate, being professed in 1903. Here began five years of practical training for him as a son of St. John Bosco.

Life was very rigorous and primitive: food was poor and only just enough, much hard work with boys, and a day of assisting and teaching which began at 5 a.m. and did not end until the boys were asleep in the dormitory. For Brother Wilfred, as he was then known, you can add the hours he spent teaching the piano and playing the organ, which from now onwards, was to take more and more of his time.

His early promise as a student matured with the years — although still very young, Battersea found him teaching the Upper Forms in Mathematics and French. In 1907 he began to study Theology, and in those days, as in the time of Don Bosco, the class or study hours had to be robbed from an already heavy day, and the surprising thing was that in spite of all this real hardship and hard work, Bro. Wilfred's small frame did not succumb. He finished his Theology in Battersea, and for his ordination went to Liège, Belgium. Here he had the joy of hearing the Servant of God, the Abbé Mertens, preach for the occasion. On his return to England as a priest the pattern was to be much the same as before — with this difference, that more and more responsibility was given him, and in each office all the trust shown him was more than justified. He was successively Prefect of Studies at Burwash, Provincial secretary, organist and teacher. In 1918 Father Couche took his degree at London University in Maths. and French; only he knows the effort it cost him. He had little encouragement, and there was no relief from the work in hand. But he succeeded. This quiet, persistent perseverance was part of the man. He was again Prefect of Studies in the House of Philosophy, and in 1931 he was appointed Rector of the promising Salesian College at Chertsey. His years there seem among the happiest in his life — he often looked back on Chertsey to a time of fruitful peace, ruffled only by the winds which disturb every religious community.

By 1939 war was in the air — in 1940 Europe was in conflict, and the Superiors chose Father Couche as Provincial to succeed Father Tozzi in the Anglo-Irish Province. Without question, though with his soul full of apprehension, he took up the task and carried the burden without flinching for twelve long years of war and uneasy peace. Looking back on those years, the appointment seems providential — he kept the Province to the traditions of the past, he feared all change, and was slow to accept new but untried methods; he was a sheet-anchor in a great storm; he stood fast to the things that had been handed down when all contact with the centre was broken. He led the Province safely through its most difficult years.

His twelve years of office saw notable developments. His name is especially dear to Ireland, because of his special consideration for the needs of the Salesian work there. The war made travel both difficult and dangerous, and to enable the work of training personnel to continue, he established a second Novitiate in Ballinakill, Don Bosco Missionary College — a house later to be burnt to the ground in 1950. He guided its reconstruction in its present temporary state lest precious vocations be lost by waiting for a more ambitious re-building programme. Pallaskenry, Co. Limerick, owes its present development to his encouragement and goodwill. He felt bound to return to Ireland all he could for the generous support he had always received from the Irish Salesians and their Co-operators.

To answer a call for help from the French Province immediately after the war, he went to Guernsey and accepted the responsibility of La Chaumière and other parish work being done by the French Salesians, who wanted to withdraw from the island. At the invitation of the late Archbishop of Edinburgh and St. Andrew's, he established the Salesians at Aberdour to undertake work for maladjusted Catholic boys — the first Salesian work in Scotland. To give the students of Philosophy better opportunity for study and training, he opened the Salesian House at Ingersley, near Bollington. South Africa owes him Daleside, a large property of 1,500 acres in a very promising area S.W. of Johannesburg, where the Salesians hope to build a large school for boys in order to fulfil a very urgent need in this part of the Transvaal. Father Couche also opened the Hostel for working boys in Booysens, Johannesburg, and the High School, St. Teresa's Mission, Bremersdorp, Swaziland, the first African Mission to be attached to the Anglo-Irish Province.

It was part of Father Couche's spirit of faith that every call upon him for new work, wherever it was, should be seriously considered in spite of enormous problems of finance and personnel: if it could be considered God's will, shown by the approval of superiors, then no sacrifice or personnel difficulty was too great. He was just the instrument God was using to spread the work of St. John Bosco and as such he must always be ready to launch out on new enterprises. To set on foot new good works is one thing, to sustain them and keep them going is quite another. You have to read the records and notes of his Visitations of the Houses to understand the punctilious care of his administration and guidance: every useful detail is noted, every item deserving praise and encouragement is mentioned, every defect needing correction is noted down, with a gentle insistence that all under him keep the Rule to the letter. So much for what he did, now let us turn to the man.

By nature he was of an anxious temperament and suffered all the torture of those who live beset by endless worries and anxieties; only his deep faith and Christian fortitude could have sustained him through the problems he had to face.

He was a model of poverty: every smallest expense appears in his personal account; he avoided taxis on all occasions and planned his bus journeys to save possible waste of money: for him the Salesian tradition was that of the early pioneers, of Don Bosco himself — he was to account to God for his administration of the things belonging to the Congregation.

His chastity was his characteristic virtue — he had a physical fear of all that was contrary to this virtue. In the presence of those whose words or conduct offended, his hands would tremble and he would seek to get away. His attitude at prayer was the expression of the man himself: simple and reverent. He was very much alive to the presence of God at all times, but especially in church; his recollection and devotion had to be seen to be appreciated.

And there is another quality which at first sight seems quite contrary to the character of the apparently timid man he was. He did not know the meaning of physical fear — he tranquilly continued his work in London while Battersea was rocked by nightly air-raids. He showed no concern in the presence of danger, — and this same quality of courage he showed in the things of moral value. By nature he loathed to hurt or refuse a request if he could say 'yes,' yet when it was a matter of principle, of religious observance, the fulfilment of vows to God, he was intransigent and could not be moved. This was the pillar of his whole life — he reduced the religious life to a simple yet tremendous thing, the total dedication of the whole man to Don Bosco's ideal. Nothing left for self: no pleasure, no reading for entertainment, no relaxation or repose, God's man turning neither to right or to left from the appointed path.

The Salesians of the Anglo-Irish Province loved him and revered him. May his gentle, kindly soul rest in peace, and may his prayers to God help those he loved and worked for to get to reach the fulfilment of their Salesian vocation. His life was an inspiration, his death was the happy passing from earth to heaven.

Let us pray for him now that he rest in Peace.

Pray also for this Province and for

Yours devotedly in Domino,

T. W. HALL, S.D.B., *Provincial.*

Data for Necrology: Father FREDERICK VINCENT COUCHE, of New Cross, London, died at North Cheam, London (Surrey), in the 70th year of his age, 54th of profession, and 46th of priesthood. He was a Rector for 13 years and Provincial for 12 years.