

CANON ADOLPHUS EVANS

Over the years I had heard various family members mention a relative on my paternal grandmother's side of the family who had been a Canon. I thought little of it at first, not knowing whether this distant relative, whom I had never met, had been an Anglican Canon or a Roman Catholic Canon. Sometime later, a further passing mention this time aroused my interest and I decided to find out exactly who this somewhat mysterious figure had been.

Having spoken to relatives I established that the Canon's name was Adolphus Evans, that he was a younger brother of my grandmother's father, and that he had been a Roman Catholic Priest who had become a Canon and the administrator at St Mary's Cathedral (also known as the Cathedral Church of Our Lady of Sorrows) in Wrexham, seat at that time of the Bishop of Menevia, but now the seat of the Bishop of Wrexham. The Cathedral was built in the Gothic style by Edward Webley Pugin and completed in 1857, originally as a parish church. In June 1997 I wrote to the administrator at St Mary's Cathedral (Father (now Canon) Bernard Morgan, who had known and worked with the Canon, and had been his Curate for a number of years) and he was extremely helpful. Father Bernard provided an obituary report (which I believe is from the 'Menevia Record') and also the original of an official photograph of the Canon taken when he was a young man. The photograph, in a card cover, bears the name of Algernon Smith, photographer, of Wrexham and it seems likely, therefore, that it was taken on, or shortly after, the arrival of the young Father Evans at Wrexham in 1935. At around the same time, I also wrote to the Parish Priest at Welshpool enquiring if any parishioners remembered the then Father Evans during his time as Parish Priest in the town during the years of World War II. Having been shown my letter by her Parish Priest, a Mrs E Chaunt wrote to me from Welshpool saying that she had been instructed and received into the Church by Father Evans in November 1943. Mrs Chaunt also provided the names of two Priests, Canon Gerald Chidgey of Cardiff and Father Paul Chidgey of Ross on Wye (brothers) who had known the Canon and who were able to provide their recollections of him. I was also able to obtain a copy of the Canon's birth certificate from the Superintendent Registrar's Office in Aberystwyth. The initial results of my research were published in a short article which appeared in the Christmas 1997 edition of 'Cross Ties', the magazine of the Parish of Aberystwyth.

In June 2002, I decided to look at the website of St Mary's Cathedral to see if any further information was available. This led me to contact Father Peter Brignall, administrator at the time, Mrs Kathryn Byrne, the diocesan archivist and Mrs Vicky Barlow, the diocesan communications officer. The result was further information I had previously been unaware of together with correspondence from a number of Wrexham parishioners who knew the Canon and who had kindly responded to a request placed in the Cathedral bulletin asking any parishioners with any information to contact me. What follows is the result of my research to date.

Adolphus Andrew Richard Evans was born in High Street, Aberystwyth (my home town) on 9 August 1905. He was the second son of Adolphus Richard Evans, a native of

Glamorgan, and a servant in a local hotel. His mother was Ellen, daughter of Cyril Farrell, a coachman. The Farrell family was believed to have been natives of Cork, thus explaining why Adolphus junior and his siblings were brought up in their mother's Roman Catholic faith in a strongly non-conformist Welsh speaking town, although it appears that Ellen herself was born in Liverpool. In terms of the paternal ancestry of the future Canon, the 1881 census shows Adolphus senior as a 3 year old living at 35 Carmarthen Road, Swansea with his father James Harris Evans, a 31 year old tailor and draper, his mother Annie, aged 30, and his 5 year old sister Mary.

In addition to Adolphus junior, Adolphus and Ellen Evans had three other sons; Richard, born in 1904, James Francis (my great grandfather), born in March 1907 and Ivor John, born in September 1909, who is said to have died young. The family also included a daughter, Mary Catherine, (known as Katie) born in July 1908 who, although still living in Aberystwyth in December 1927, is said to have later left Wales to live in London.

I know very little about the early life of the young Adolphus and his siblings but it seems likely that they were members of the Roman Catholic Parish of St Winifrede's Church in the town. The day before his 15th birthday the young Adolphus lost his mother, Ellen, who died of peritonitis at the age of 44. Ellen Evans was not buried in the Roman Catholic section of the town's cemetery on Llanbadarn Road, as would be expected, but lies buried in an unmarked grave in the nearby Anglican churchyard of the historic Llanbadarn Fawr Church, dedicated to St Padarn. At around this time it is likely that Adolphus was giving consideration to making the Priesthood his vocation in life and it is almost certain that he would have served as an Altar Server at St Winifrede's as, quite probably, did his brothers. Whether his widowed father encouraged his son's vocation, it is impossible to say, but the now teenage Adolphus would have been encouraged by his Parish Priest, Father Walter Baggaley, who served the Parish between 1901 and 1921.

Having made his decision, he studied towards this end at the Royal English College at Valladolid in central Spain. Founded, with the support of King Philip II of Spain, for the training of priests for the English and Welsh Mission in 1589, the foundation of the college was approved by Pope Clement VIII on 25 April 1592. The college houses the statue of Our Lady Vulnerata (Wounded Lady), a statue of the Madonna and Child brought to the college from Cadiz in 1600 following its desecration by an English force which had sacked the city in June 1596. The college made reparation on behalf of their fellow countrymen by offering to take custody of the statue and to this day, weekly devotions are said for the conversion of England and Wales. During his training at Valladolid, Adolphus became fluent in Spanish and spent his holidays with a Spanish family teaching English to its younger members. He is remembered by one of his fellow trainees as being a conscientious student who was popular with both the staff and his contemporaries. In December 1927 Adolphus, who was now aged 22, learnt of the death of his father, aged 49, who it is said had never come to terms with the death of his wife seven years earlier. Adolphus senior, a window cleaner, was buried with his wife at Llanbadarn Fawr.

On 21 May 1932, at the age of 26, Adolphus was ordained at the Bishop's Palace in Palencia, Spain. Following his ordination he returned to Wales as a diocesan priest of the Diocese of Menevia and became an assistant priest in the industrial town of Llanelli. Three years later, in 1935, Adolphus was moved to Wrexham again as assistant priest but now with the added responsibility of being secretary to the recently appointed Bishop of Menevia. The new Bishop, Michael McGrath, had previously served as parish priest in Aberystwyth and it is likely that he was well known by the Evans family. Adolphus remained at Wrexham until 1939 when he was appointed parish priest at St Winifrede's, Welshpool, a small market town on the Welsh side of the border near Shrewsbury. Adolphus remained in Welshpool for the majority of the war years until early 1944 when he was appointed a chaplain to H.M. Forces. December 1946 saw him temporarily supplying in the Pembrokeshire port of Pembroke Dock and in October 1947 he returned for the second time to Wrexham and St Mary's Cathedral.

On his return to Wrexham, Adolphus became Canon and administrator of the Cathedral. The new position involved Canon Evans (who, it seems, referred to himself as Adolph, never Adolphus, and signed himself 'Dolph') acting as a parish priest on behalf of the Bishop who, due to his position, was unable to carry out many of the day to day duties of a parish priest in Wrexham. The North East Wales town had originally been part of the Diocese of Shrewsbury but in 1898 became part of the newly created Diocese of Menevia. Canon Evans was to hold this important position for over thirty years. During this period his name went forward to succeed the recently deceased Rector of Valladolid. It seems that Canon Evans did not relish the prospect and was quite content to remain in Wrexham. It is not clear, however, whether or not he was actually offered the rectorship and refused it. He did, however, regularly attend the annual meetings of the Valladolid Association.

Canon Evans does not seem to have visited his home town of Aberystwyth very often, despite the fact that he had a large number of relatives in the area and, somewhat intriguingly, it became apparent during my research that he spoke nothing of his childhood, family or background to those he lived and worked amongst. I have, however, been shown a postcard (now in the possession of a niece of the Canon) which he had sent to a family member. He was close friends with Father John O'Brien, a Cardiff priest, with whom he had studied at Valladolid. The Canon spent most of his holidays with the O'Brien family and was considered by them to be one of the family. He did, however, return to his home town in February 1964 to officiate at the funeral Mass of his elder brother, Richard Evans, a highly respected and active member of the parish in Aberystwyth who had died aged 59. Despite the sadness of the occasion, this was quite a family affair; not only did the Canon celebrate Mass but he was assisted by his 14 year old great nephew (my father) an altar boy at St Winifrede's for a number of years. This appears to have been the only occasion when his many nieces and nephews and their families actually met their uncle and my father can remember him being a somewhat stern looking man. In May 1957, the Canon celebrated his Silver Jubilee, a milestone which is recorded in the 'Menevia Record' of May 1957, together with an official photograph of the seated Canon in his finery. I was kindly sent an original of this

photograph by Mrs Carole Bryan of Wrexham whose father, Mr Ted Flanagan, was a close friend of the Canon.

The Canon was a talented artist and musician and visitors today to St Mary's Cathedral will see his pencil drawing of St Richard Gwyn, the first Welsh Martyr. Gwyn, a school master, had been born in the Mid Wales market town of Llanidloes in 1537 and his continual refusal to attend a Protestant church eventually led to him being charged with high treason. On 15 October 1584 he was executed at Wrexham, the authorities believing that the blood of a Welsh Catholic would have to be spilled on Welsh soil as an example. Richard Gwyn was beatified on 15 December 1929 and was canonised by Pope Paul VI in 1970. In addition to the pencil drawing by Canon Evans, the Cathedral contains a memorial window, icon and relics of the saint.

In early 1982, at the age of 76, Canon Evans was still undertaking the duties of administrator at the Cathedral. However, it seems that he fell ill and on 15 April 1982, a mere five weeks short of the Golden Jubilee of his ordination, he died at the Convent of Mercy Nursing Home in Colwyn Bay. The day before his funeral, two Masses were held, one in the morning for the schoolchildren led by the former Bishop Langton Fox, and one in the evening, led by Father Bernard Morgan. The following day, the requiem Mass was said by the Bishop, John Aloysius Ward, later Archbishop of Cardiff. Having spent much of his life in the North Wales town of Wrexham, he was buried in the town's cemetery, being interred in the grave of the Bishops of Menevia. His obituary, which appeared in the Daily Post on 17 April 1982 described him as 'beloved by many local people both in and outside the church'. The 'Wrexham Leader' of 23 April 1982 quoted Monsignor James Hannigan (later Bishop of Menevia) as saying at his funeral 'his ever present smile, his patience and his manners were for so many of us an anchor in our everyday lives'. Adolphus Evans can lay claim to being the only native of the Parish of Aberystwyth to have entered the priesthood. Prior to 1987 the Roman Catholic Church in Wales consisted of the Archdiocese of Cardiff (covering the former counties of West, Mid and South Glamorgan, in addition to Gwent and parts of Herefordshire) and the Diocese of Menevia, which covered the remainder of Wales. On 18 March 1987 a Papal Decree carved out a new Diocese of Wrexham from the northern part of the Diocese of Menevia, which was reduced in size and saw the seat of its Bishop move to St Joseph's Cathedral in Swansea. Adolphus Evans, or Dolph as he was known, is remembered with great respect and affection by all who kindly shared their knowledge and memories of him with me. The following is a selection of anecdotes kindly shared with me by those who knew the Canon:

'We used to have a strawberry tea party in the summer and we had to go in fancy dress and Canon used to be the judge'.

'I spoke with a Cathedral parishioner today and he said that he (the Canon) was a very gifted man. The parishioner I spoke to said that once he had lunch at Bishop's House with Bishop Fox and Canon Evans and that Canon Evans kept them entertained throughout the meal with his stories'.

‘There would be a buzz among the kids as soon as he came into the classroom and I remember in those days we used to have swivel blackboards. Canon would go behind the board and do a chalk drawing of some unsuspecting child. He’d then swing it round for us all to see – and the likeness was amazing. He once drew me and I can still feel myself blushing to this day!’

‘He used to give some wonderful sermons and I can still remember him berating the men folk for putting more money behind the bar than they did in the offertory plate’.

‘I met Canon Evans in 1973 whilst on 'holiday' in Wrexham. He was a nice man - I remember him describing Anglo-Catholics to me as "All dressed up and nowhere to go!"’

‘Canon Evans had a pal, a Spaniard, who he had met at college in Spain who used to come in summer for a few weeks. One day he had a little chat about what I did, and he said in his Spanish English “You are a pillar of this Church”. “No Father” I said “It’s Canon Evans who is the pillar”’.

‘I did visit him once in hospital, where he sat in state and the nursing staff were in awe of him’.

‘He was genuinely a man of his age, a gentleman from top to toe, a meticulous churchman, a stickler for decorum on the altar, and a stern teacher of his curates. I will never forget him’.

‘To many he was like a father, brother, Grandad, as well as priest’.

‘The day he died children came home from school in floods of tears’.

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David Gorman
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