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Parochial Vignettes.

V. OUR SISTERS THE LAITY.

THE title sounds a little odd, but it can be justified. For the laity are really the people of God, answering to the people of Israel, the spiritual and taught people in contradistinction to the Gentiles and the heathen people. Sex is necessarily no element of the original term, and has no right to be. And we do a work acceptable to truth, as well as to the sacred rights of women, to rescue the term from its one-sided use. And so we stand on solid ground when we speak of our Sisters the Laity.

And there are other reasons why we should press it, for our Sisters the Laity have somehow been neglected in church matters as though they were altogether subordinate. The men are all to the fore; the women are mostly in the rear. Church offices are nearly all in men's hands. Official meetings are managed almost entirely by the same sex. Men are the voters, and only men are thought fit to sit on church councils. They might be Zenana women for the external voice they have in the management of their own church. Now and then a lady becomes a churchwarden. A lady has been seen collecting in church. But these are like winter swallows, uncommon and rare. No doubt the day will come when the woman will insist on her rights, and push her way into higher church positions, and when she attains her purpose, woe betide the men, for her numbers will swamp them, undoubtedly. And then the remedy will prove worse than the original evil.

Now, I am conscious that I have no right to deal with this subject except the common right of filling a wide gap when it has not been filled, or the right of a common interest. But, being quite certain that the subject demands discussion, I am bold enough to say my say just to lead off and let a little fresh air into a somewhat closed topic. Our Sisters the Laity are too important a body and too numerous and too much misunderstood to let their want of representation remain uncriticized.

Naturally, we must try to understand the place they fill in the church of to-day. It is almost staggering to realize what our churches would be without them.

They form the bulk of our congregations, for one thing. Elim-

inate the woman, and what would your congregation be like? Districts vary in the proportion of men to women, but take what part of the land you like, you will inevitably find that it is women who largely predominate. It is of no good saying that the world holds more women than men. Perhaps it does, but the proportion in the world is far less than the proportion in church. The truth is that few of the men are there, and most of the women are.

Women too form the bulk of the church workers. Your District Visitors are women. The great majority of your Sunday School Teachers are women. Your collectors for charitable works are mostly women. In fact, were it not for our Sisters the Laity the parish machinery would almost come to a dead standstill.

Women are the best givers as a rule. Run your eye down a subscription list, and note the number of women's names, and note also the amount of their gifts. It is an object lesson in the largeness of the sisters' hearts. Neither is it always the well-to-do who are the generous givers. Many of them live on less than they may give more, and spare on their backs than others may not starve. The amount of self-sacrifice which goes on in some inconspicuous homes is well known to many of us clergy. Where there is the least show, there, as a rule, is the largest generosity.

To our women too is largely due the driving power of the parish. To carry on a parish on business lines just as you would run a shop is hardly possible when the fruit we seek is spiritual, and is not reflected either by balance sheets or increase of numbers. The parochial atmosphere is more important than the parochial organization. And this higher spirit is more due to the piety of our women than the push of our few men. The faith, the prayer, the urgency of appeal, and the might of character are largely the contribution of our Sisters the Laity. Go into some manifestly thriving parish, follow up the spiritual streams which flow with such fertility, and you will see how much of this is due to faithful women. It is they who follow up cases assiduously, who keep at it and refuse to give in, who trust on in the face of apparent failure, and who keep their brightness when storms are sweeping around. We men are often shamed by their depth and reality, and quickened into truer life by the example they set us.

And from all this we may gather how vital is the place of women in our parishes, how indispensable they are, what bankrupts we

should be without them, how ready we should be to show our appreciation and gratitude to them, and to give them place and power corresponding. For men to adopt superior airs, to relegate women, being such as they are, to holes and corners of office, and to take to themselves all the credit for their work is sheer folly and insult.

It will be advisable here to dwell a little on the qualifications of our Sisters the Laity for their splendid work in the church. We need to investigate these good features, which are peculiarly their own, if we would understand their power for good.

Naturally, they have more leisure for such work than their Brethren the Laity. This must never be forgotten. Only let it also be remembered that the leisured classes are by no means always the active classes. Selfishness has bitten too deep into many leisured people to set them free for Christian work. To have leisure and to use it helpfully are not always or generally concomitants. It is only when the leisure and the good will keep step that our Sisters the Laity sally forth on errands of mercy. Little can be done from a sense of mere duty if the heart goes not with it. To do religious work without liking it must ever be drudgery. And so in our list of qualifications we must set down a delight in spiritual work. Little as their gay sisters in the world may understand it, they really do their work amongst the poor and needy because they are happier there than anywhere else.

Another qualification will necessarily be their consciousness that they have something good to bring into the homes and hearts of their sisters. To bring themselves is only to bring a duplicate of the whole world of sisters with some more sorrows, despondencies, and weights. But if they know a Master Who has shone upon their own souls and life, and Who has given to them experiences which they would fain share with others, they have a mission as well as an errand. For after all we have nothing else worth bringing than a Christ Who died and lives and Who knocks at human hearts that He may enter. It is His company, the story of His love, the message of His cross which make our work worth while in this sad and poverty-stricken world. To stop short of Him is only to bring make-believes and shams of blessing.

There is one beautiful qualification which goes far in a woman's ministry, and that is that delicate sense and touch which we call tact. It is a feature of all wise and good women, and it is this sense

which prevents all bungling words and movements. It is their tact which makes them know exactly when to come and when to go, what to say and what to leave unsaid, when to go on and when to stop short. For they have to do with those most delicate of organisms, human hearts and tempers, which like flowers open and close according to the light or shade. To do just the right thing, to say just the right word, is the most difficult operation in the world, and only the nicest of tact will ever succeed. They must be able to read moods and characters like a book, and act accordingly. And it needs well-endowed women to do it.

And when all this is crowned with the spirit of love we have a fitness which is of earth's best. For they must have no favourites, and must not turn aside sharply when the unloving come along. They must be like their Master, loving because they cannot help it, and caring most for the souls who are loveless and outcast. Like a mother who lavishes her wealth and care upon the imbecile or the cripple, they must seek out specially the most lost. Certain we may be that it is but rarely that a man can love quite as our sisters love in the realm of the spirit life. And, having all these deeper fitnesses, we are not surprised that they should keep on day after day, and hope to the very end. Your woman worker with a heart so alive is a wonderful staying power.

Lest from my honest eulogies of our Sisters the Laity any one should assume that I am praising them beyond their merits, let me go on to consider their limitations. We all stop short and come short somewhere, and it is no disgrace to acknowledge that we are not yet perfect in our natural and spiritual endowments.

Thus, many of our women workers have somewhat contracted sympathies. Intense, like the concentrated rays of a burning glass, upon their own sphere, they are apt to overlook the importance of the sphere of their neighbour sister a little way off. It may be that this is a part of their power to narrow their angles of sympathy, but it is apt in working to estrange their sisters' kindness when they find their preserves being poached on. Penguins are not the only creatures who in their zeal for their own nests steal the eggs of their neighbours. The parson especially will feel the foreshortening of this spirit, for in his zeal for the whole parish he is anxious to infect his workers with as wide a sympathy as possible, and it jars upon his mind to find narrowness where he yearned for breadth.

Our Sisters the Laity have a tendency, too, to work for their own hand, as if their work were a little parish of their own with no connection with the wider work of the parish. This *imperium in imperio* naturally works parochial harm, whatever the gain for the individual souls under their care. And when pushed to an extreme, which it may easily be, and often is, it may breed a spirit of positive dissension, and create a situation absolutely untenable. Thus a very independent and masterful lady may quite conceivably scout the parson's authority and lead away her class to another church where she fancies they may get better fare. Such independence cannot be very common, but it has been and will be again. When the sister breaks away and paddles her own canoe in this rebellious fashion, having neither the grace to resign nor to obey, she will do the most surprising things without a blush.

There are jealousies, too, which seem more at home in a woman's breast than in a man's, and which too often are found among our Sisters the Laity. Being gifted, or cursed, with a quick and vivid imagination they often think that they are slighted or overlooked, or that their services are not sufficiently appreciated or praised. It is a pity that so many workers are not satisfied with God's approval, but must yearn for man's as well. It is a clear defect, but it is common enough. And the fruits are hateful, work given up, Christian women passing one another with the stiffest of bows, and the bosom heaving with all kinds of hateful feelings dear to the devil's heart. And it is more than likely that the offending sister will betake herself to some other sphere where she will probably run the same round before long. Ah! well, there are bad eggs in every basket, and the parson must not expect his workers to bloom into angels just yet.

I am afraid some women are not as statesmanlike in their methods as they might be. Just as they find it difficult to take in the whole parish, so they fail to take in the whole church. It is almost impossible for a woman ever to think imperially, much less to act imperially. Most of them are of the microscopic, not the telescopic type. It is this which makes many women hopeless in wider spheres where large views over large areas are essential. Where it is necessary to look well forward, and with an eye to the future and the distant, women do not shine perhaps so well as men. I am sorry to have to say it, but truth is too great to be trifled with for anybody's

mere pleasure. It is only of the ordinary type that I speak, because as a matter of fact there are women of first-class powers for any work, however vast.

It is possible, too, that with most women sentiment has deeper roots than reason. Swayed by their feelings, they may even transgress the more sober reason, and say and do things which sensible people would decry. Music makes them feel good. Emotional appeals lift them to the seventh heaven. Bright lights shine with a glory which raises them to great heights. It is true that these emotions do not last, and that they leave them poorer than before. But the sensation is so pleasant that they must quickly have a repetition of it. And so they are apt to come to church with the same emotional desires with which they go to a play or read a moving novel. And it plays the same part in their work. In their gush of sympathy they give money to the undeserving and importunate, and aggravate poverty rather than relieve it. Appearances weigh much more considerably than they should, and they are led away into all sorts of extravagances by strong and unbridled feeling. In fact, sentiment becomes a poison to them, and the more they yield to it the more harm they do to themselves and to others. Not that sentiment need take this course, not that it always does, but that this is its tendency and is often its fruit.

For the same reason the superficial appeals strongly to them. Many of them in their dependence on the outward and visible would treat religion as they treat themselves, and the church as their houses. And so we find here and there that they would fain dress the church as they dress themselves in glowing colours and the latest fashions. And the parson himself they would take in hand and dress up too in gorgeous vestments, aglint with all the colours of the rainbow. Decorations they cultivate to an extreme, and they love to see the banners waving. Plain services are as hideous to many women as dowdy apparel and neutral colours. And this, let it be confessed, is the secret of much Ritualism and Romanism. Indeed, the growth of ritual in our own church would never have been but for the taste of our Sisters the Laity for its cult of show and æstheticism. Natural tastes have indeed rent our beloved church from top to bottom in the effort to please the eye, tickle the ear, and satisfy the cult of the beautiful. Outside religion is always easier than inner realities, and while it is possible to satisfy the eye

and the ear with religious semblances, so long will the religion of show and form keep its popularity. I am writing now of those women to whom this externalism is all, not of those who, having a deeper faith, like it as an addition for the expression of their feelings.

In dwelling at such length on our sisters' limitations as a class I would not for the world convey the notion that they are not in earnest and mean well and are quite honest. I am not reflecting on their reality, and have tried to do them justice in the former part of this paper. Their excellences are many, and would be mightier were it not for their limitations. These limitations must be taken into account together with their unquestioned powers for good.

But now a word or two about their frailties, positive elements for evil in the church. For an irreligious woman is not made less so by connection with a church, if that connection is only formal and nominal, but the church is much the worse for her influence.

For from our Sisters the Laity, alas ! comes much of the worldly element which devitalizes a church so disastrously. The motives may be good, but bereft of grace they know no better. With a commanding spirit, ever to the front, they want to make the church go as if it were some social thing like a dinner party or a ball. And so they drag in the spirit and methods of the world to achieve their purpose. Under their influence the church becomes a sort of Vanity Fair, with revels of the Fair to the fore. With their card-playing, play-acting, dances, and the thousand other ways of the world, they hurry things gaily on, and drown the church under a perfect deluge of frivolities, until you begin to wonder whether it is the church that is drowned by the world, or whether the two are not at last made one. For the old antagonism between the two is gone, and the new rule of "Go as you please" has swept away wholly the old Christian rule, "Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven." And when some feeble protests are made they sweep them superbly aside as narrowness, strait-lacedness, and old-fashioned Puritanism. And the poor parson, magnetized by their great vitality, tries to think that one must not be too nice in small matters, and that "Other times, other manners" excuses such drastic changes. Besides, the golden rain excuses much in this poor world, and, as it is only for a time, the church can later settle down

on her old sober bottom. And one must not make enemies, you know. So he argues.

A frailty whose bitter harvest we often have the shame of reaping belongs to the chattering sister whose tongue proves too much for her. If love moved her speech we should not have such reason to dread it, but when another spirit moves her the parish is soon set by the ears. It is not malice, but just the natural inability to put an effective brake on when silence is demanded. It is painful that sheer bubbling good nature should work such dismal havoc, but it does so again and again. In fact, half the troubles of a parish take their dismal rise from some tongue which has broken loose and run riot over other people's business. I have said that it is not malice which starts the mischief, but I must also say that malice keeps it up and passes it on and aggravates it. For when the battle is fairly joined the natural tempers swing into line and fight fiercely. I am not saying that men cannot offend with their lips, for they do. But the man is rarely the finished and headlong offender that his sister is.

Their frailty is also manifested in their constant love of change, which pushed to an extreme in a parish causes bitter heart-burnings and wreckage. Many women are such creatures of fashion that they import it even into their churches, if they can. And so they seek to change the fashion of their services as they do the shape of their hats or the cut of their dresses. Given a parson without convictions of any particular strength, with a weakness open to be played upon by a woman of greater strength, and with a love of popularity, and your fickle lady will be able to work her sweet will on the church services to lengths most disastrous. Irresistible woman has before now reduced a peaceable parish to ruins. She has changed the simplicity of the parish worship, and has altered a hundred other things as well, for she has brought down an avalanche with her silly love of change.

But her chief mischief comes from quests entirely personal and selfish, as when for her own matrimonial advancement she plays a part. This is why a married parson is often less popular than an unmarried one. This is why an unmarried curate has so many female friends who adore his sermons and flatter his gifts. They do not confess to themselves that their new religiousness and interest in church work comes from so earthly a source. They would even deny it. But is it not evident to everybody else?

And that nothing but harm can come from this quest is evident too. "We shall have no peace in the parish until the parson gets married," is the common saying. And when he does marry interest in him is apt to die, and interest in the work of the church dies, alas! too.

There is one other frailty which I must touch upon, although with some it may not be considered a frailty at all, and that is the woman's love of direction. Many women want somebody else to do their religious thinking for them, and many sisters are glad to shift the responsibility of their soul upon another. And so they look around for some priest who is willing to take the burden upon his shoulders. This is why they go to confession and welcome the priestly absolution, as if they had really settled everything spiritual by these means. They must be easily satisfied. Is the Lord Jesus so hard to reach? Is His written word so difficult to understand? Is the stream likely to be purer when it passes through human hands than when it comes straight from Christ the Rock of Ages? And is the system to which, in their love of direction, they have committed themselves and their eternal interests so sure and divine and beyond question that they have a right to surrender themselves to it? If this man-made system is ousting the old way of access to Christ Himself, and men are more and more barring the way to Him and His cross, whom have we to thank for all this but the women who, forfeiting their own inalienable right of personal and direct access to the Lord Jesus, have fallen into the hands of misguided men?

I fear I shall not have time to discuss some of the problems which rise in the neighbourhood of our Sisters the Laity, but it seems a pity to leave the subject of our church womenkind without touching a little on them.

Thus it is a moot point how far a woman should work amongst young men. That they have done excellent work amongst men I should be the last to deny. Their influence for good has been vast. They have often succeeded where the mere man has signally failed. And not infrequently they have been the only ones ready to take up the work. And it has happened that they have grown up, so to speak, with the lads, and have followed them up to manhood. And so it almost seems as if the sanction of experienced success has sealed the wisdom of the work. But there is one proviso which may

be made, and that is if the teacher be old enough. And the older the better. Thrown so close together, it is well perhaps that nothing earthly should intrude to spoil the tie of affection which is the very condition of spiritual success. Neither men nor women lose their nature because the tie is spiritual; rather the nature is apt to become accentuated. Hence there are healthy limits which had better not be passed even in so good a cause. We who have looked on, who have had experience, and have known issues we thought impossible, are inclined to say that it is better to keep to the safe side, and, even if such classes be in danger of dissolution, to suffer it rather than expose one or the other to possible dangers. Not all successes are spiritual ones, for all their seeming show, and numbers kept together have not always proved to be unmingled blessings. And often have we seen that what the class has seemed to gain the church has lost.

Then there is the problem of the larger voice for women. In municipal electoral matters the rule is no taxation without representation. Suppose this were the rule in church matters, what would happen. Church Representatives at Diocesan Councils they certainly would be. They might even be elected to Convocation. So far as they have received the voice I do not think it has been an unqualified success. They have either sat silent and followed the majority, or they have talked too much; both excesses. If we could secure the best women we might venture.

The modest woman, who is humble, shirks tasks of responsibility which seem to her to be beyond her powers. And so it happens that while the best shrink back it is often the worst who press forward. Whatever solutions we may apply to these and other problems one principle stands prominently out, and that is that where a woman knows more than a man, and wherever her natural sphere is, there she is intended by nature to act and speak. On women's questions she must be supreme. And children fall within her sphere far more than a man's. Once define clearly her province, and we shall be saved the disasters which arise when the woman invades the man's province and the man invades the woman's. It is here that our danger signals must be run up.

CHARLES COURTENAY.

[The concluding article in this series—"The Parson's Wife"—will appear in the June number.]