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ART. V.—THE POSITION OF THE UNBENEFICED CLERGY.

THE recent danger of Disestablishment, which has happily passed away for the present, has not been without beneficial effect upon the Church which it threatened. It has acted as a tonic upon public opinion, and as a stimulus also to the more lethargic official mind. It is now fully recognised that some measures must be taken to amend certain abuses, and so to strengthen the position of the Church. Abuses have grown up imperceptibly; and, inasmuch as vested interests have grown up side by side with the abuses, it is exceedingly difficult to set the machinery of reform in motion.

Not the least important of the present defects in our ecclesiastical system is the very unsatisfactory position of the unbeneficed clergy. This is a question which sooner or later the Church will certainly have to face; and the sooner the question is thoroughly taken in hand, the easier it will be to make a satisfactory settlement.

The system of employing assistant curates has developed in a haphazard kind of way. It was adopted without deliberation, almost unconsciously, and no provision was ever made for the vast development which it has reached at the present day. The number of unbeneficed clergy is now larger than the number of those who hold livings, and the difference tends to increase. In the London diocese, an examination of the Bishops' visitation registers shows that about two hundred and fifty years ago—in 1666—only 12 per cent. of the clergy were unbeneficed. A century later—in 1745—the proportion had grown to a little under 45 per cent. In another century—in 1846—it was just over 60 per cent. During the last fifty years the number has swelled to 200 per cent. The London diocese is an extreme example, but the tendency is the same throughout the Church.

Briefly stated, the position of the unbeneficed clergyman is this:—Like his beneficed brother, he is frequently underpaid, and the poorer the parish the more laborious is the work, and the more difficult it is for the incumbent to raise a sufficient salary for the curate. Again, he is not the master, and his energy is crippled through lack of opportunity for initiative. This, in the case of older men, though unavoidable, amounts to a hardship. Further he is liable to dismissal, through misunderstanding, or even through the caprice of the incumbent, and sometimes through lack of means to maintain him in the parish. Thus he comes to be regarded by the parishioners as a bird of passage, here to-day and gone to-morrow, and suffers accordingly in prestige; neither is it possible for him to take

the same interest in the flock as a permanent pastor. Worst of all, as he grows older his lot becomes harder, because he finds it increasingly difficult, whenever a separation is deemed advisable, to obtain another curacy, younger men naturally being preferred to fill subordinate positions.

Various suggestions have been put forward to remedy this state of affairs. But most of them, especially those advocated by the recently-formed Curates' Union, savour too much of trades-unionism methods, and have been repudiated by the large majority of curates themselves. The curates, in fact, are very rightly suspicious of propositions which seem to degrade the office of the ministry to a mere means of livelihood.

It has been proposed, for example, that when there is stagnation in promotion, the Bishops should refuse to ordain more than a limited number of men, and thus, in the language of trade, "restrict output." To pursue such a course would obviously be detrimental to the true interests of the Church, and would tend to make the Christian ministry a close corporation.

It has also been suggested that the same end might be attained by making the examinations harder, and so raise the standard of qualification for ordination.

Although this latter proposal may be open to somewhat the same objection as the other, there is much more to be said in its favour, more especially if the Bishops could see their way to put life into the diaconate, and to make it a reality by the creation of a permanent lay diaconate, raising the standard of qualification for the priesthood only. The other proposal for the compulsory retirement of incumbents at a certain specified age, merely to stimulate the flow of promotion, is also open to certain obviously serious objections. It would rob the Church of her ripest fruit.

What is really required is some remedy which shall not be at the expense of the efficiency of the Church as a whole, and which shall not be in the interests of those inside the clerical profession at the expense of those who are seeking admission. Is it possible to find such a remedy? There are at least three ways which suggest themselves as satisfying these conditions:

1. The redistribution of present endowments.
2. Instead of specifying an age at which a man should retire from a living, to specify an age before which he may not enter upon one.
3. To raise a large new endowment fund.

1. The first of these, namely, the redistribution of the endowments already in possession of the various parochial and capitular bodies of which the Church is composed, is the one

which comes most readily to hand. And it is one which has very frequently been put forward as a means of augmenting the incomes of the smaller livings. For this reason it has been mentioned here. It may, however, be dismissed at once from further consideration, as scarcely coming within the range of practical politics. It is also, from other considerations, which it would be superfluous to enter into here, of doubtful desirability.

The other two are much more feasible.

2. In order that all may have a better chance of holding a living, it might be made not permissible for anyone to enter upon a benefice under the age of, say, thirty-five, and also after having been at least ten years in the service of the Church. This would reduce to some extent the competition for benefices, and improve the prospects of the older unbeneficed clergy, whilst it would be no real hardship to the younger ones. It could also be productive of nothing but good to the Church at large. A young man of promise who might be quite capable of undertaking the cure of souls at the age of twenty-nine would be all the better fitted with six years' more experience at his back, at the age of thirty-five. It would also by its operation abolish one of the greatest scandals complained of at the present time, namely, the appointment to parishes of young and inexperienced men. This arrangement would involve no additional expenditure, and would go a long way towards mitigating the evil. It would not, however, of itself be sufficient to effect a radical cure.

3. The third suggestion would require large financial aid from the members of the Church, but there is no reason why such aid should not be forthcoming. Were the matter fairly brought before the laity, with proper safeguards that the money should not be wasted, there is every probability that a free response would be made to this appeal.

There is at the present time a movement on foot for raising an enormous capital sum as a common endowment for increasing the incomes of small livings to a minimum of £250 to £300 per annum, or of attaining the same end by a scheme of annual subscription similar to the Sustentation Fund of the Free Church of Scotland. In a letter to the *Times* a correspondent pointed out that the great difficulty in the way of this is the fear in the public mind that the money would only go to increase the market value of advowsons. But the same correspondent considers, as is most probably the case, that many patrons of small livings would be willing to forego their patronal rights on condition that the stipend of the living were augmented.

But in any case no scheme of endowment which does not

also include the unbeneficed clergy would be adequate for the present needs of the Church. It is unreasonable that a clergyman who has been fortunate enough to obtain a benefice should have his stipend raised to a sum sufficient to enable him to live in decency and comfort, while an equally competent unbeneficed clergyman should be left to starve on a pittance. There are, in fact, fewer impediments in the way of raising the stipends of curates all round than of beneficed clergy. The difficulty with reference to patronage, for instance, would not come in.

On the other hand, it cannot be contended that the lowest figure proper for a curate's stipend is sufficient for a beneficed clergyman. An incumbent must always have claims on his purse and pecuniary responsibilities from which the assistant clergy are exempt. If £250 to £300 per annum be the ideal minimum for a benefice, £200 to £250 would be the ideal minimum stipend for a competent assistant curate of a certain standing, say of twenty to twenty-five years' standing in the Church.

The following scale of remuneration is set down tentatively by way of illustration, but no special merit is claimed for the particular ages selected :

From 23 years of age to 28,	salary as now, by arrangement.
" 28 " ★	35, not less than £150 per annum.
" 35 " "	45, not less than £200 per annum.
" 45 " "	and upwards, not less than £250.

The question of pensions is a separate one. Undoubtedly the scale of pensions should be fixed upon the basis of self-help, prudence, and forethought on the part of the recipient in his younger days.

Such a schedule as the above would have to be made more flexible to adapt it to all circumstances. For instance, a salary of £120 in a Lincolnshire rural parish would be quite equivalent to one of £150 in the West End of London.

The establishment of any great central fund for increasing the stipends of curates would involve a great deal of adjustment with societies such as the Church Pastoral Aid and the Additional Curates Society. It certainly ought not to supersede them. To propose a scheme of adjustment would be beyond the scope of this paper, and it would be premature as well. There should, however, be no insurmountable difficulty. It might be best to have separate diocesan funds instead of one large central fund. Again, it seems most likely that money for the maintenance of the assistant clergy would be more freely given if the laity of each congregation, through their representatives, had some say in the selection of curates. But this also is a question by itself.

With regard to the curate's greatest anxiety, the insecurity of his position in the parish, the difficulty is much greater, and the utmost caution is needful. It may be conceded at once that a curate's position cannot possibly be made so secure as that of the incumbent. "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" and in case of a serious difference arising it is the unbeneficed one who *must* leave.

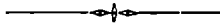
Yet it is surely possible to go much further in the direction of security of tenure for a curate than is the custom now. The Bishop's license should be made a reality, and it should be made a very serious and difficult matter for a curate to leave his parish for any reason but that of preferment. It ought to be made quite impossible even to suspect that a curate was obliged to leave because his Vicar was jealous of his powers; and a curate ought not to be allowed to change his sphere of work for trumpery or insufficient reasons.

Were such a rule in vogue, the work thrown on the Bishop's shoulders would no doubt be increased. But if so, the work of investigation might very well be delegated by him to the Rural Deans, or to others nominated by him, who should act in his name, and with his authority.

Lastly comes the question, How is all this to be brought about? Raising the necessary money is, perhaps, the least difficult part. Without resort to Parliament every proposed measure of Church Reform is strangled in infancy by the unsatisfactory state of ecclesiastical law. The Church herself is tied hand and foot by statute and by ancient custom. The force of public opinion must be brought to bear upon the subject. Were that once aroused, *and wisely guided during the process*, technical difficulties would soon be brushed aside.

The present period of freedom from external attack is the time for Church Reform of every kind. A certain measure of well-considered reform would give increased confidence to the laity, and would inevitably secure a generous response to any appeal, even on a large scale, for the more adequate (may we not say the more decent?) remuneration of deserving clergymen.

W. M. FARQUHAR.



BASIS OF AN EIRENICON.

1. **I**T is admitted by old-fashioned Protestant High Churchmen that the English Church, in its Homily for Whit-Sunday, warrants the use of the term "regeneration"—"spiritual