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The Clergy and National Irreligion.

VERY much has now been written and more spoken about the need for national repentance for sins and general estrangement from God. And without a doubt we marvel that God has so long spared our nation any overwhelming catastrophe. That He has done so in face of the persistent flouting of His laws and careless contempt for true religion, must imply that He has a knowledge of a future return to righteousness of which we, as yet, have but the very faintest signs, though strong hope.

The great National Mission of Repentance and Hope is being assiduously brought before the majority of people in the land by the clergy. Organization is being pushed almost to the danger point wherein we shall begin to trust in man's power to do what only the Holy Spirit can. Vast floods of earnest prayer are being poured out at meetings conducted by the clergy; and if God was to be influenced by persistency and volume alone, rather than by other conditions, there could be no doubt of the ultimate result of the work of the clergy.

But there is a verse in Psalm lxvi, that may well give the clergy pause. "If I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear me." The writer cannot longer withhold what has long been bearing heavily on his mind and conscience to deliver.

For the irreligion of the country at the present time the clergy are in very great measure directly responsible. They have been, and are yet, with quite few exceptions, helping to perpetuate this irreligious spirit, and at the same time encouraging prayer for a radical change in the nation's relation to God. But "If I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear me." Having made a charge, it is a duty to substantiate it.

The thought was borne in upon the mind of the writer some months ago. Since that he has, at least, refused any further share in the wrong to the country. But the evil that men do lives long, and he acknowledges guilt in the past.

It is so easy to overlook causes, and to be misled into attacking results, that we clergy are in great danger of perching ourselves upon a pedestal of imagined blamelessness, concerning the Sabbath desecration, the widespread immorality, drunkenness, gambling, and

deplorably low public morality evidenced in the literature and cinema shows of the day.] But are the clergy blameless? Emphatically No! That is, not blameless, if we, as Christians, believe that prayer is of any value; that the Holy Spirit is ready, in answer to prayer, to guide the individual soul and life, and therefore (since the nation is only composed of individuals) the religious life of the nation. Let me use an example.

We have, all of us (at one time or another), been asked to add our signatures to a petition to be presented in Parliament, or to a body of those in authority, or even (some of us) to our Sovereign Ruler. Very rightly great weight has attached to the number of signatures to be obtained. The reasons are obvious. Those interested in the matter to which the petition relates are so in earnest, so keen that the hoped for result shall come about, that they take all trouble and use every possible means to bring the matter and the opportunity for signature before the greatest number of likely sympathizers; and then they make it easily possible for signatories to be present to sign the petition. However worthy the object, however it might commend itself to the Sovereign or body petitioned by reason of its own intrinsic merits, we must allow that numbers do and should carry much weight and influence. But if, instead of using every means for attaining some worthy object (e.g. one which would undoubtedly prove of benefit to the national health), those who were officially responsible for obtaining signatures throughout the country were content to arrange that Petition Forms should be on the tables at an hour when in all probability the fewest signatories were likely to be present, or even failed to announce the hour at all, but left it to chance, or—worse—even secretly planned, at the request of some one with influence, to meet at an hour unknown to the public for the purpose of signing the petition together,—if this was their conduct, and if in consequence the petition failed, and as a result the nation was caused loss of benefit, suffering in its national health, upon whom would you without hesitation fix the blame? Whom would you consider responsible for the after results upon the nation at large? There is no need to help you in coming to a right conclusion. The answer is evident. Those responsible for the evil results are those who failed to do their best to cause it to be otherwise. “To him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (Jas. iv. 17).

Without driving the simile to undue lengths, let the Petition be replaced by the Service for "Public Baptism of Infants" of the Church of England; let the "Sovereign Ruler" be the King of Kings Himself; let the "subject of the Petition" be the outpouring and indwelling of the Holy Spirit upon the individual to be baptized; let the eligible signatories be replaced by the praying Christians of our congregations; let those responsible for obtaining signatures be represented by those who have been solemnly ordained, and at one time promised to "serve God for the promoting of His glory and the edifying of His people," and are, beyond all others, responsible for obtaining prayers for the little souls commencing a Christian life as individuals of a great nation, and the point of this paper is not difficult to discern.

I take it for granted that (1) no one reading further is a believer in "Baptismal regeneration," in the sense that, "ex opere operato" the outward and visible administration of Baptism, of necessity, either invests the soul with the Holy Spirit, or converts the baptized; (2) that we do approve of Infant Baptism, and (3) that the one great and active force in our "Public Baptism of Infants" service is the petition, more commonly called prayer, to "God the Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ that of His bounteous mercy He will grant to this Child that thing which by nature he cannot have, that he may be baptized with water and the Holy Ghost, and received into Christ's holy Church and be made a lively member of the same."

Our Prayer Book, of the Protestant Church of England, with purposeful intention calls this service "Public." There is a perfectly distinct direction that Public Baptism of Infants is "not to be administered but upon Sundays and other Holy days when the most number of people come together." I say there is intention of spiritual importance to the nation in this rubric. The whole idea is that, because Baptism of itself cannot effect any change in a child's soul, there may be numbers there to accept the invitation, given in the first breath of the service, "I beseech you to call upon God." This invitation is a result of the conviction that upon the prayers of the people will depend the future spiritual life of the Child to be baptized.

Multiply this one "child" by some millions, and you have each twenty years the spiritual life of a generation at stake; in sixty or seventy years, you have, dependent upon the prayers of those who

should be present at Baptisms, practically the whole spiritual life of our nation.

Now bear with some plain questions ; first to the clergy, then to the people.

How far have you, by arranging for Public Baptism to be held at a time (which the Prayer Book has ruled is best for the religious life of the nation) " when the most number of people can come together," helped to obtain for the children of the nation the prayers of the largest number possible, so that they may be granted " that which by nature they cannot have," thereby aiding true religion amongst us ?

How far have you, by following a bad long-standing custom, and arranging for Public Baptism to be practically a private service, often without any notice given to those who have a right to know (without being compelled to take in a parish magazine or to read over a notice board), or worse, how far have you, by actually conniving at a secret " Public " (oh, the sadness of it) Baptism, for a child of so-called " Superior " parents, who for hateful caste reasons (though not daring to ask for like concessions in the other sacrament) refuse to meet around the font with their " beneath them " neighbours' children ; how long and how far, by this careless and unworthy practice, have you, by depriving your children of the nation of the prayers of Christians, been indirectly, at least, reducing the number of petitioners at the throne of the King of Kings, and have that far failed to do all that you, as responsible, ought to have done to secure the greatest numbers of prayers for the Holy Ghost to take those young lives of the nation into His charge and to guide them into true religion ? How long ?

Then to the people. How long and how far have you, by your determination to be present whenever at all possible, however awkward the hour arranged, at the admission of new members into your society, the Church of Christ, been helping the religious life of the nation by your prayers for its youngest citizens ? Or how often have you taken part in, or even actually proposed (what placed your minister in a most awkward position) the secret Public Baptism Service, thereby reducing to the minimum the prayers that could be offered for the particular child's soul ?

Solemn thoughts these. But when we are faced with the results of irreligion in our nation, and feel it high time to organize a Mission

of National Repentance, the possible causes are not lightly to be ignored.

This denying of the prayers of many hundreds of thousands (who are present at morning or evening services) for the future religious life of the children of the nation has been going on for long years. Who have been responsible for this? The clergy of course. The result is abundantly evident now. It could have been foretold with certainty. We are, as a nation, quite irreligious, and an irreligious nation must be a nation of sin-committers. The pushing of the Sacrament of Baptism into a corner; the careless encouragement thus given to the people to treat this solemn means of grace, ordained by Christ Himself, as nothing more than something to be "done" or as a respectable charm, by the majority of our clergy, is a glaring scandal in the Church, and a permanent black finger of rebuke to those whose very reason for existence, as a body, is to further national religion.

The Sacrament of Baptism must be restored to its rightful place, both in the services, and in the minds of the people, for the spiritual life of the nation is depending upon it.

It is of no avail to quote "where two or three, etc.," as an excuse for continuing to arrange to make the attendance of the "most number" wellnigh an impossibility. What right has any minister of the Gospel to encourage "caste" abominations in the administration of one of the Sacraments? Is it done to keep peace with some influential moneyed parishioner, upon whose purse many parochial organizations depend for support? It is done at the price of lost prayers for such an one's child's soul. Is this a good exchange? If these children grow up irreligious, who is primarily responsible? (A clergyman's wife, talking over this matter, tells me "all our children were privately baptized in church!" Shame.) When a pastor has continued this practice for long years in a parish, and then learns of so many whom he baptized at hours when congregations were not present becoming utterly careless of their own souls, and falling into sinful irreligion, can he dare to face his congregation and talk of the need for national repentance? Better to have given the generations of children their rights when they were being launched out on to the sea of the world, than now to be hastily throwing lifebuoys when their souls have been wrecked!

If prayer at Baptism is of any value towards helping a child to

“lead the rest of his life according” to the religious beginning, if ten praying persons are better than two, and forty than ten, and so on, then those in authority (before they proceed further in organizing their dioceses to repent for results) should tackle the cause, and see that this great wrong being done to the nation’s children, and so to the nation itself, encouraged and winked at by the clergy, is remedied at once. The Prayer Book provides the authority in its rubric. They must insist that in all parishes the Sacrament of Baptism be restored to its rightful place, and that the chance “if necessity so require” is not interpreted in any parish so as to mean “on all possible occasions,” but very strictly as the exception to the rule.

The fact is that the clergy are very greatly responsible for the present irreligion of the nation.—*Q.E.D.*

If one-tenth of the energy now being spent directly and indirectly, openly or otherwise, to make the Lord’s Supper the “chief service” of the Lord’s Day, were expended upon restoring Baptism to its rightful place, thus giving back to the nation’s children a right long since denied to their forerunners, there would be greater hope for the future of the Empire. For the nation the Sacrament of Baptism is of greater value than the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. One is to influence a whole life. The other is for a life that has been influenced.

Objections, difficulties, “modern conditions,” the demand for shortened services and the like, will be urged against this needed reform, but not by the spiritually minded. Those who believe it better to deal with even one possible cause (if it is not *the* cause) of the present terrible results of irreligion, will treat difficulties as incentives to perseverance in reform. It will not be easy to educate the minds of the people to the changed order. It will be strongly resented by many whose sole appearance in a place of worship is biennial, or earlier, when the form of baptism has to be gone through. But besides having the welfare reform of the nation in view the clergy have to clear themselves of the reproach of having encouraged irreligion.

C. D. FOTHERGILL.

