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An Obsolete Rubric.

IN the notices of the Easter Services it is by many considered the proper thing to emphasize the Easter Communion by quoting verbatim the penultimate Rubric from the Order of the Administration.

The Rubric runs thus: “¶ *And note, that every Parishioner shall communicate at the least three times in the year, of which Easter to be one.*”

The intention of the quoters of this Rubric is admirable. It is a laudable desire to lay stress on the duty of Communion more especially at the great feast of the Resurrection. In some cases indeed it may be feared that hereby there is an attempt to increase the roll of Easter Communicants irrespective of quality or fitness; but the great majority, we trust, are superior to the seductive influence of numbers and are solely actuated by the highest motives. Is it well, however, to quote this Rubric without preface or explanation, as an Authority? In the opinion of the writer of this article (and perhaps a little thought will induce the readers to assent) the Rubric, however desirable, is wholly obsolete—a relic of a bygone age, utterly inapplicable to present circumstances, and necessarily more honoured in the breach than in the observance.

Unfortunately it is characteristic of the Church's reluctance to adapt herself to new conditions that she persistently clings to ancient Rubrics, long after these Rubrics have fallen out of date. Even when she has the opportunity of modifying them, she disregards the opportunity. The Canterbury Houses of Convocation in their Revision of the Prayer Book propose to leave this Rubric just as it is.¹ But they also propose to leave untouched other Rubrics in the Communion Office which are equally obsolete. For instance, we may inquire what meaning in the present time have the words which immediately follow: “And yearly at Easter every Parishioner shall reckon with the Parson . . . and pay to him all Ecclesiastical duties, accustomedly due, then and that time to be paid”? What clergyman receives these duties at

¹ The present stage of revision is not final. What is criticized in this article is the last recension of the Rubrics by the Canterbury Convocation. It is to be hoped that wiser counsels may ultimately prevail.

Easter more than at any other time? It may of course be maintained that Easter Offerings, which are now more or less common, are hereby understood. This would be reasonable, if the clergy had not been for the last few years appealing against the taxation of Easter Offerings *on the express ground that they are in no sense anything of the nature of a "duty" or a debt, but the free-will offering of the contributors.* We cannot have it both ways. Either the offering is "due," and is therefore taxable; or, it is not, and then the Rubric is obsolete.

A similar clinging to an obsolete rule is supplied by the Rubric which bids intending partakers to signify their names to the Curate. This too is commonly effete. Scarcely any Churches require its observance, and, where they do, it is not observed for the early but for the late Celebration, with the questionable object of discouraging midday Communicants. Yet the Revision, as at present decided, is to leave this Rubric practically intact. Indeed, in Rubrical matters Convocation seems blindly wedded to the past. Even the Rubric about the "North Side" is to be left, though more than half the Bishops disregard it. "West is West," says Mr. Rudyard Kipling; but according to the Canterbury Convocation "North is West"—at least for those who choose to think so. The writer has no objection to standing on the West side, and for some years he has observed the "Eastward" position. To him it is a matter of complete indifference where he stands. But he feels strongly that to continue to maintain the words "North Side" when two-thirds stand on the "West" is an anachronism, an anomaly and a blunder. Surely it would be a simple matter, which ought to satisfy all parties, if "North or West" were substituted.

We must, however, limit our attention in this article to the Rubric about *Easter*. And, as it stands in its naked literalness, two propositions may be safely affirmed: (1) It is impracticable; (2) It is undesirable.

IT IS IMPRACTICABLE.

The words "Every Parishioner *shall*" evidently point, not to an ideal impossible of even approximate fulfilment, but, to a general duty with which there is a reasonable hope of compliance. At the time when these words were inserted (1552) such a presumption was in a fair way of accomplishment. The Church of England

was the only recognized Church. Dissent, as we know it now, did not exist. Roman Catholicism had not yet become schismatical. Every Parishioner was a Churchman. Parliament was then and for long after wholly composed of Churchpeople. The rules of the Church could be enforced by severe and drastic penalties. "Shall" in the Rubric was practically synonymous with "must." In the years before the Reformation everybody of proper age, with few exceptions, was a Communicant (though the great majority were content with a single Communion in the year). If people did not communicate they were liable to ecclesiastical censure and penalty. After the Reformation it was impossible to maintain the same stringency; but still obedience to Rubrics could be secured in a way impossible now, and any one who has studied the reign of Elizabeth knows how the Statute Book bristles with edicts against Nonconformity.

It is otherwise in the present time. No Churchman, however much he may incur the Divine Judgment, is penalized for not being a Communicant, beyond incurring the criticism of the more devout among his co-religionists. Indeed, he may even be regarded as a *bona fide* Churchman and allowed to vote for representation in Parochial or Diocesan Councils, though he has never gone to Communion at Easter or any other time. For, according to the franchise recently adopted at such Elections, *the electors need not be Communicants*. They must have been confirmed (that is the meaning of the cumbrous and stupid phrase "having the status of a Communicant"), but they may have never actually communicated. Yet, in spite of this condonation of laxity, we continue to retain the order that all our people "shall" communicate at Easter and at least on two other occasions in the year.

But Churchpeople, nominal or real, do not now exhaust all our Parishioners. A considerable portion in every Parish do not belong to us, and, although they may as Parishioners have a claim on our ministrations, we have certainly no claim on them. In the absence of a religious census we cannot define the exact porportion. But in the Army 70 per cent. are entered as "Church of England," which shows that the remaining 30 per cent. is alienated from us, while any one who is acquainted with the Army is well aware that much of the 70 per cent. is purely nominal, and that in an average Parish the porportion would be less favourable to the Church of

England. We have to face the fact that from 30 to 50 per cent. of the population have drifted from us even in name, and that of the portion which profess to belong to us a large number have the most shadowy conception of their duty. In these circumstances it seems foolish to maintain a Rubric which is not observed by more than one-tenth of our people and which, even if desirable, it is impossible to enforce. To allow a man or woman to exercise the rights of Churchmanship and to vote in Parochial elections, while he flagrantly neglects the primary duties of Churchmanship, is an anomaly which needs correction. The time has come to draw a distinction between a Parishioner and a Churchman. The two were much the same in 1552; they are not in 1917.

But there is yet another class which must be excepted from the Rubric—viz., the large number of children who have not reached the usual age for Confirmation.

These are Parishioners, for they live in the Parish. Can we allege of them that "every" one of them shall communicate at least three times a year? The only way by which the Rubric can be made practicable in their case is by a reversion to Infant Confirmation and Infant Communion. Are we prepared for this? In the absence of such reversion it is futile to maintain a bare rule which cannot possibly be observed with anything amounting to general or universal obedience.

But even if the Rubric were practicable, and we have shown that it is not,

IT IS UNDESIRABLE.

The Sacraments of the Church were given to be used not to be abused, and it is the duty of their responsible custodians to guard them from profanation. In the case of the Sacrament of Baptism there are searchings of heart in many quarters whether we are right in encouraging the indiscriminate baptism of any child brought to the font by enthusiastic district visitors or disreputable parents, when there is no probability of their receiving any Christian training at home. No missionary to-day would surreptitiously baptize the infants of heathenism in a vague hope that the Sacrament might somehow benefit the child, apart from any likelihood of it being followed up by Christian teaching or Christian example; and the environment of some children in England to-day is not so very far removed from heathenism.

In the case of the Holy Communion there are still stronger reasons against an indiscriminate use, because the warnings in Scripture against an "unworthy" reception are both more explicit and more ominous. Our Catechism enforces this truth by declaring that self-examination should precede reception. The Articles emphasize the peril of a careless approach. The Communion Service itself in the last of the three Exhortations is equally stern in its language. And yet, in the face of all these warnings, the Rubric without any qualifications whatsoever asserts that "every Parishioner" shall communicate at Easter. Imagine what it would mean if the injunction were to be literally obeyed. Suppose that next Easter "every Parishioner" were to present himself. This means that every Nonconformist shall come. Are those who went into a panic over the Kikuyu controversy, and were appalled at the not unreasonable suggestion that Nonconformists in the Mission Fields might under exceptional circumstances be admitted to our altars—are they likely to contemplate such a result with equanimity? It might indeed be an excellent demonstration of Home-Reunion and from many points of view a consummation devoutly to be wished; but we imagine that many of the people who print this Rubric in their Easter notices would stand aghast at the very idea. But "every Parishioner, etc.," means more than this. It means that thousands of people, living dissolute and immoral lives, are invited. It implies that no discrimination is needed. The invitation is broadcast—"Whosoever will," let him come.

Of course it will be assumed that certain restrictions are tacitly implied, and that these restrictions are supplied in other parts of the Prayer Book. It may also be alleged that the *Vulgus Prophanum* is not by any means likely to accept the invitation thus widely offered. But if it be so, why is there no suggestion of reserve in the Rubric and why is it to be allowed to stand in its bold and uncompromising audacity? Much harm in the writer's opinion is caused to religion by exaggerated statements which will not bear the searchlight of truth, or fail to correspond with the observation of experience. The statement, for instance, in the *Quicumque Vult* that except a man keep the creed "whole and undefiled" (*integram inviolatamque*) "he shall *without doubt* perish everlastingly" has done not a little to repel devout and thoughtful men who have

considerable hesitation in making such affirmations. Even the bare statement in the Catechism that the *two* Sacraments are "generally (i.e. universally) necessary to Salvation" cannot be maintained, if we think of our unconfirmed children or such persons as George Fox, Elizabeth Fry and many others, who from the strange perversity of their system rejected both, though the deficiency was apparently supplied in some other way. Is it wise to issue formulas such as these, when we know that without large exceptions they cannot be maintained?

It would not be a difficult matter to frame a new Rubric suitable for present circumstances. The Irish Prayer Book has in place of ours: "*All Ministers shall exhort their people to communicate frequently.*"

This would answer the purpose; and, if it be desired to emphasize the Easter Communion, some words such as these might be added: "And all Communicants of the Church should after due preparation partake of the Holy Communion at Easter."

These words would be equally efficacious with the present Rubric and less liable to misinterpretation.

The worst of the Rubric as it stands is that it gives encouragement to that "whip-up" of Communicants before Easter which in *some* Parishes is done without discrimination or warning, as though there were a certain undefined magic in an Easter Communion which made up for neglect of it at other times. We know a Parish where the Vicar has repeatedly proclaimed it to be one of the aims of his life to reach 1,000 Communicants at Easter. He is getting near it, and one can imagine that it only wants a little extra push to induce kind-hearted and obliging people to gladden his heart, by completing the desired figure. Bishops, it may be feared, are sometimes apt to form their impressions of the success of Parish work from statistics of Easter Communicants, and when the figures are exceptionally large the fact is advertised in the press. To some extent the number may be an index of a Church's prosperity; but many other things need also to be taken into consideration, and the Churches which have the largest roll are not always those who are foremost in missionary zeal or philanthropic endeavour.