

ART. VII.—THE MONTH.

THE Representative Church Council has disappointed some of its promoters. The two Archbishops thought it desirable that one of the two days which are all that can be spared to it out of the year should be devoted to some subject of wide and practical interest, and accordingly selected the Licensing Bill as the subject of discussion on the first day. It may, perhaps, be doubted whether it was wise to occupy the first sitting of a Church Council, which is still in a tentative condition, with a subject which happens to be of urgent political interest. The main purpose of the Council was supposed to be to deal with Church affairs; and much as the Church is interested in the promotion of temperance, a Licensing Bill is not a specifically ecclesiastical subject. However, the question gave occasion for a singularly interesting debate, and one fact which it illustrated is of great interest to the future prospects of the Council. The lay speaking was of far more consequence than the lay vote. Members of Parliament like Lord Cross, Mr. Cripps, and Mr. Wharton stated with practised ability views and considerations which would hardly have been presented with such force if the discussion had been entirely in the hands of the clergy, and in all probability it was this which decided the issue. There was a large majority of Bishops in favour of an amendment which urged the necessity of amending the Bill by introducing a time-limit to compensation; but among the clergy of the Lower Houses there was a large majority in favour of Mr. Cripps' motion in support of the Bill, and a still larger majority among the laymen. The clergy, in fact, followed lay opinion rather than that of the Bishops; and it is quite possible that in future discussions, even upon more strictly ecclesiastical subjects, the lay voice may similarly prove far more influential than the lay vote.

It was, we venture to think, a mistake to call for a vote by orders on such a subject. The question at issue was not one on which the peculiar views or rights of the three orders were in any way involved, and it may be hoped that, in the rules of procedure which are to be prepared by a committee, it will not be left in the power of any single member to call for a vote by orders. It is a pity, however, that the result was not accepted with a better grace in some quarters. Not only the Bishop of Hereford, but even the Bishop of Rochester thought fit to explain in the *Times* that the Council could not be considered really representative of the Church. The Bishop of Rochester considers it a "commonplace" that the Council is defective in this respect, and suggests that only

“the more dignified and senior clergy, and the more conservative section of the laity,” are as yet adequately represented. It will not, we think, be forgotten in future discussions on still more important matters that the authority of the Council has thus been disparaged even by some of the Bishops who have been most active in promoting it. After the examples of the Bishops of Hereford and Rochester, anyone who dislikes a decision of the Council, and who wishes to diminish its influence, will have a good excuse for saying that the Council is not really, as it claims to be, representative of the Church. It ought, we think, to be treated—at least, by the Bishops—as being as good a representation of Church opinion as can practically be got at the present time; and those who wish to develop its constitution and to increase its functions should at least treat its decisions with respect. Moreover, can anyone doubt that, if the votes of the clergy and laity had been favourable to the views of the two Bishops in question, they would have unhesitatingly quoted them as indicative of Church opinion? The practical result for the moment is to disparage the importance and damage the prospects of the Council, and it is to members of the Episcopal Bench that this is mainly due. If it is agreeable to them, there are a good many people who will not be greatly displeased.

The second day was devoted to questions relating to the future constitution of the Council. A well-meant proposal by Mr. Proctor and Sir John Dorrington that the lay members of the Council should be elected by the direct vote of the duly qualified electors was defeated, like the amendment on the Licensing Bill, by the weight of lay opinion against it. Men like Sir Francis Powell were able to tell the Council, from painful experience, what would be the pecuniary consequence of direct election by large constituencies. A more urgent and interesting question was raised by Chancellor P. V. Smith’s proposal “that it is desirable that the initial franchise of lay electors should be so extended as not wholly to exclude women, and that the Presidents should be requested to appoint a committee to consider and report to the Council at their next sitting how this extension should be carried out.” The debate was too much occupied, both on one side and the other, by consideration of the claims of women in the abstract. Lord Hugh Cecil argued for their absolute exclusion, and the arguments of the Bishop of Worcester and the Dean of Arches were directed rather to the general claims of women in the matter than to the particular point at issue. But the question, as the Dean of Canterbury pointed out, was not an abstract one, but the simple practical one of whether women should be “wholly excluded.” By putting the motion in that form,

Chancellor Smith practically deferred to the decision of the Council in the session of last year that women should not be admitted on an equivalent footing to men. The only question was whether any exceptions should be allowed to this general rule, and many persons, like the Dean of Canterbury, who had argued strongly in Convocation against a general admission of women, saw no reason for pushing the principle to an extreme against them. The Council had adopted as the basis of its franchise a vestry qualification, which, if not specially modified, would admit a limited number of women. It seemed hard to deprive them of this existing right, even if it be somewhat anomalous; and the limited class of women who, by old English custom—a custom older than the Reformation—may serve as churchwardens, may well be allowed to retain any privileges which naturally accompany their present position. Possibly some women in an analogous position may also be admitted; but if the committee to whom the question is referred propose too wide an admission, the Council next year will be able to restrict it.

A much more difficult question was raised by Mr. Gray's motion that the lay members of the Council "should not deal with questions concerning the doctrine or discipline of the Church." Lord Hugh Cecil moved an important amendment, which may be the basis of further discussion. But it was generally felt that the questions at issue were much too large and difficult to be adequately discussed in a quarter of the time which had been allowed to the Licensing Bill, and there was a general acquiescence in an amendment proposed by the Bishop of Worcester, "That the President be requested to appoint a committee to consider how the distinctive functions of Bishops, clergy, and laity, in respect of the doctrine and discipline of the Church, may be formulated and safeguarded, and to report." It will require a strong committee to deal satisfactorily with that reference, and it ought to report very deliberately. But there is no occasion for haste in the matter. The constitution of the Council, even provisionally, is not yet settled, and as some of its most distinguished members doubt its representative character, the wisest course will be to advance very slowly.

