

brilliant work, "The Days of His Flesh," pp. 40, 41: "His Temptation in the wilderness most strikingly evinces the sinlessness of our blessed Lord. When Saul of Tarsus retired to the desert of Arabia, he was haunted by the remembrance of his 'exceeding madness' against Jesus and His saints. It clung to him all his life, and during that season of retirement he would mourn over it, and vow with sore contrition to make the future, so far as he could, a reparation of the past. But far otherwise was Jesus employed during His sojourn in the wilderness. He could look back without regret or shame. It was not the past which concerned Him, but the future; and His only thought was how He should do the Father's will and accomplish the work which He had given Him to do. The past had left no regret, and He faced the future, not with tears of penitence and vows of reparation, but with a prayer for guidance, and a steadfast resolution to recognize no law save the Father's will and seek no end save His glory. It was a spotless life that the Messiah consecrated to the work of the world's redemption."



## The Case of the Curates.

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THE falling off in the supply of clergy is a common subject of complaint. The number of candidates for Holy Orders has been steadily falling for many years, while that of candidates for other professions has as steadily risen. This is generally attributed to the poor worldly prospects which the Church offers to its ministers in comparison with other occupations. This, no doubt, is one of the causes, but by no means the only one. There are still many clergymen who can disregard this consideration. There never is the least difficulty in filling a "living," however small the stipend may be.

With a curacy the case is very different, as many vicars know to their cost. The dearth is really one, not of *clergymen*, but of *curates*. This suggests that one cause of the diminution of candidates may be the unsatisfactory position of this latter class of clergy. That there is wide dissatisfaction at that position hardly admits of doubt. It may be at once admitted that the grievance is not mainly financial. Scandalously low as is the payment of all the clergy, curates, as a class, are probably less

badly off in this respect than a large number of the beneficed. But their position is in many other ways anomalous and unsatisfactory. The object of this paper is to inquire how these anomalies arose, to show the harm they do to the work of the Church, and to suggest a remedy.

## I.

The first thing to remember is that the assistant curate is a comparatively modern institution in the Church of England. The "curate" of the Canons and the Prayer-Book was any priest who had the cure of souls. The word, as we now use it, means a clergyman, whether priest or deacon, who exercises his ministry under the direction of a beneficed clergyman. In this paper the word will be used in its popular, though less accurate, sense. It must also be remembered that "curates" and "unbeneficed clergymen" are not identical, though the terms are often used as if they were. The modern "curate" is the result of an attempt—ill-considered and accidental—to utilize the unbeneficed clergyman, who is a much more venerable personage, in the service of the Church.

In the earliest ages of the Church there was no distinction between beneficed and unbeneficed clergy, for the simple reason that none were beneficed. The unit of ecclesiastical administration was the diocese. The Bishop lived in one central place with a college of presbyters, who went to and fro at his direction, and returned to the home in which they led a common life. These itinerant clergy are referred to by Bede, who complained to Archbishop Egbert of York that their visits were too infrequent. But there is no mention of them after the Council of Clovesho—A.D. 747—and parochial cures began to be established about the end of the eighth century.<sup>1</sup> Parish churches were built and endowments given for resident clergy. These, however, were still members of the college of presbyters, administration was diocesan rather than parochial, and the dependence of the clergy on the Bishop was complete. Benefices arose with

<sup>1</sup> Dansey, "*Horæ Decaniciæ Rurales*," i., p. 77.

lay patronage. The landowner who gave the endowment claimed the appointment of the priest, and invested him with the outward signs of his office.\* This, as well as institution by the Bishop, was held to be necessary to a valid appointment.<sup>1</sup> The benefice thus came to be regarded as a piece of property, and its holder to be to a large extent independent of the Bishop. This establishment of beneficed priests with a definite cure of souls probably began in France earlier than in England, and was not completed in this country till the reign of Edward the Confessor. From that time it has been a settled rule that there should be in every parish one responsible "spiritual person" with cure of souls.

The first trace that I have been able to find of any division of this responsibility is in a decree of Archbishop Langton's—A.D. 1222—in which he orders that two or three priests shall be provided for large parishes, but nothing is said as to the subordination of one priest to another. At a somewhat later period we find evidence of the existence of unbeneficed priests, who appear to have been rather troublesome persons. They are required by Archbishop Winchelsey—A.D. 1305—to be under the direction of the incumbents, and are forbidden to stir up strife or interfere with the rights of the beneficed clergy. Archbishop Islip—A.D. 1362—requires "chaplains unbeneficed, but especially fit for the cure of souls" ("Capellani non beneficiati, præsertim idonei curis animarum"), to assist in parish work as well as officiating in their chapels, for a moderate salary. An Act—36 Edward II., cap. 8, A.D. 1362—orders such priests "to serve the parishes and attend the cure of souls," if required to do so by the ordinary, for salaries of from five to six marks. These salaries were raised by 2 Hen. V., cap. 2, A.D. 1414; but the obligation remained, at least in theory, until these Acts were repealed in 1623.<sup>2</sup>

This all looks as if there were assistant curates in England

<sup>1</sup> Selden, "Origin of Tithes," vi., p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> See these documents in full in Gibson's "Codex," tit. xxxvi., caps. v. and vi., vol. ii., pp. 898 *sqq.*

before the Reformation. But it must be remembered that these unbeneficed clergy were no part of the regular ministry, but were looked upon more or less as outsiders. They generally had endowed chantries in which they were to celebrate Mass, or they were maintained for this purpose by wealthy laymen. The best of them, to some extent, supplied the place now taken by assistant curates, but as a class they were regarded as rather a nuisance, and they disappeared soon after the Reformation.

The "curate" of the Canons and the Prayer-Book differs in character both from his medieval predecessor and his modern namesake. The word in the formularies always denotes the priest who has cure of souls in a parish. But he was often the representative of an absentee incumbent. Pluralities were never approved by the Church. They are condemned by the Lateran Council,<sup>1</sup> and one of the earliest Acts of Parliament after the Reformation—25 Hen. VIII., cap. 18—is directed against them. But they continued to exist in large numbers till comparatively modern times. The authorities seem generally to have contented themselves with enforcing the provision of a suitable curate, and an occasional visit from the holder of the benefice. That assistant curates existed as early as A.D. 1584 is, indeed, clear from the answers given by the Bishops to some articles offered to Parliament, in the first of which they say that there "must be curates of necessity," or "such as have great cures will be overburdened with the saying of service, preaching, ministering of Sacraments, all themselves."<sup>2</sup> And in Canon LVI. —A.D. 1604—it is provided that "every minister, being possessed of a benefice that hath cure and charge of souls, although he chiefly attend to preaching, and hath a curate under him to execute the other duties that are to be performed for him in the church . . . shall twice, at the least, every year read himself the Divine service," etc.

But nearly all the references to "curates" in official documents of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are to the deputies of non-resident incumbents. The modern use of the

<sup>1</sup> Phillimore, "Eccles. Law," p. 14.    <sup>2</sup> Cardwell, "Doc. Ann.," i., p. 418.

word is said by Cardwell<sup>1</sup> to have occurred first in a letter of Archbishop Sheldon's in 1665. Even then it is not used exclusively in this sense—indeed, throughout the eighteenth century the other was the predominant one. And there is ample evidence that, as lately as 1831, the number of assistant curates was very small. For in that year a return was made to Parliament of the number of clergy of each kind in each diocese in England and Wales. From this it appears that there were 10,560 benefices, of which only 4,649 had resident incumbents. But 1,684 incumbents, though non-resident, were discharging their duties. This leaves 4,227 benefices in which the incumbents did no duty. There were 4,373 curates, so the number available after the vacant benefices had been served must have been very small, even allowing for the fact that one curate may sometimes have served two parishes. There are now, according to the latest figures obtainable, about 14,300 beneficed and 8,200 unbeneficed clergymen. This last figure probably includes all unbeneficed clergymen who hold a Bishop's licence to officiate, and many of these are not assistant curates in the ordinary sense of the word. But there can hardly be less than 6,000 of the latter. And the tendency is—and probably rightly—to meet the needs of an increasing population by the multiplication of curates rather than by the division of parishes.

## II.

From this historical survey it appears that the assistant curate is not only a comparatively modern, but an anomalous and almost accidental institution.

During the last century the population of this country has not only largely increased, but has been far less evenly distributed. The growth of the great towns has entirely altered the conditions under which the Church has to do its work. The system of working by assistant curates is the rough-and-ready way in which the Church tries to meet these altered circumstances. It

<sup>1</sup> "Doc. Ann.," ii., p. 271.

was never formally established, but came into existence through the operation of that powerful factor in the making of institutions—the “chapter of accidents.” This, however, would not of itself condemn the system or preclude its adoption by authority. The English mind has ever been tolerant of anomalies so long as they work well, and if that could be said of the one under consideration, there would be no need to ask for its alteration. But, in fact, it is not only anomalous in its origin, but mischievous in its working, and this in several ways.

1. It entails unnecessary hardship on the individuals whom it affects. First, it involves incumbents of large parishes in pecuniary obligations which they ought not to be asked to incur. They are legally liable for the stipend of any curate licensed by the Bishop until that licence is revoked by the authority which granted it. This is surely unfair. The endowment of the benefice is for one clergyman, not two or more; and if the work is beyond the power of one man, the necessary assistance should be provided by the Church. It was quite right to make incumbents liable when the need for a curate was due to their own non-residence, but it is altogether different now. The stipend of the curate should in all cases be provided from a diocesan fund, to which the holders of the more valuable benefices might be called upon to contribute.

But the effect of the existing system on the curates is still less favourable. It is true that, by the Act 1 and 2 Vict., cap. 106, they are given certain rights which they had not before. The most important of these is the requirement—by § 96—of six months' notice to terminate a curate's engagement, which can only be given with the consent of the Bishop. The only exception is in the case of a new incumbent, who can dismiss a curate with six *weeks'* notice, and *without* the consent of the Bishop. This last proviso is a clear injustice, and ought to be repealed. And the rest of the clause does not give the curate the protection which it seems to do. For at best it only secures him his stipend, and leaves him entirely under the control of the incumbent as regards his work. And it is the

general practice of the Bishops to advise a curate to resign when he disagrees with his vicar, even though he may have been guilty of no dereliction of duty. This must make the position of a curate more precarious than that of a beneficed priest.

Another very real grievance from which he suffers is the diminution of his stipend and the increased difficulty of getting work at all when he ceases to be a young man. In every other service remuneration is progressive until the maximum is reached, or the age of retirement comes. In the clerical calling alone the reverse is the case. This, again, is due to the fact that the curate is regarded as the personal assistant of the incumbent rather than as an officer of the Church. Another disability from which he suffers is his exclusion from Convocation, which is due to the fact that there were practically no assistant curates when that august assembly was a real power in the Church. Far less excusable is his exclusion from participation in certain Church funds, of which the Queen Victoria Clergy Fund and the recent augmentation fund of the Ecclesiastical Commission are perhaps the most flagrant instances.

2. These are disabilities which affect the curate's *temporal* status. They involve inconvenience and injustice to a hard-working body of men, and on that account alone their removal is required. But what is much more serious is the effect on the *ministerial* status of the clergy concerned, and so on the work of the Church, of the notion that the unbeneficed clergy exist to be the personal assistants of their beneficed brethren. This is seen in the almost universal relegation of the curate as such to a subordinate position in which his chief, if not his only, duty is to carry out the instructions of his vicar. This has various mischievous results.

It is certainly one of the main causes of the falling off of candidates for ordination—at least, of those whom it is most desirable to attract. And it tends to lessen the efficiency of those who are ordained. It is perfectly true that in every calling a beginner must learn his work under the direction of

his seniors, and carry it on for some time under supervision. But it is no less true—though much less generally recognized—that when the period of apprenticeship is passed, the great majority of men work much better in an independent than in a subordinate position. This is specially true of such a calling as that of a clergyman. In some cases, when the work is that of carrying on a great organization, it may best be done by all engaged in it acting under the direction of one governing mind. But in such a work as that of the ministry, which is almost all individual, the exact reverse is true. The chief requisite is not obedience to orders, but a high sense of responsibility and some power of initiative, and these are just the qualities which the position of a curate under our present system tends to retard rather than to develop. The discipline which is excellent and necessary for a learner is thoroughly bad for a man of mature years and experience.

The natural objection which capable men feel to the prolongation of the period of tutelage hinders that redistribution of the clergy which the altered conditions of Church-work make so desirable. With our great and growing town populations we want to diminish our number of rural and increase our supply of town clergymen, and we want our strongest men in the prime of life where there is most work to be done. And many such men would rather stay in the towns than go into the country; but they take country livings to get a position in which they can work on their own lines. It would surely be to the advantage of the Church to retain these men in positions where their energy and ability would find adequate scope.

3. For these reasons some change in the present system seems to be urgently required. The remedy is often sought in some reform in the system of patronage whereby there should be more discrimination in appointing to "livings." This, no doubt, is eminently desirable, but it would not meet the case. The present writer is convinced that the only adequate remedy is frankly to abandon the principle that each parish can have only one responsible head by whom its whole working must be



controlled. This was quite a sound principle when all cures were of such a size as that one man could administer them with, at most, a single assistant in the case of a few of the largest parishes. It is quite unsuitable now, when a large number of our parishes can only be properly worked by the division of labour amongst a number of colleagues. And it would probably tend to greater efficiency if more of the smaller parishes were combined. This cannot be done at present owing to the impossibility of reducing the number of independent positions.

We have, in fact, to substitute collective for individual responsibility, and to make the relation between vicar and curate one of partnership—not of employer and subordinate. It is sometimes said that to do this would be to introduce disorder into the work of the Church. But it is the principle on which great businesses are managed, on which the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge are governed, and which exists in our cathedrals. These latter afford a visible proof of the possibility of partnership in matters ecclesiastical. Such a question as the introduction of a Choral Eucharist or an Evening Communion into a cathedral would be settled by a vote of the Chapter, not by the authority of the Dean; nor could the latter dictate to any of the Canons the position that they should take in celebrating the Holy Communion. If this can be the rule with perfect harmony in a cathedral, there seems no reason why it should not be so in a parish church.

It would, of course, be necessary to secure that the members of such a parochial Chapter should be men of capacity and experience. This might be done if the Bishops could see their way to grant a special licence or diploma to all clergymen who, with seven years' good record of parochial work, passed a prescribed examination, in which they might be allowed to obtain a certificate of distinction in special subjects, such, *e.g.*, as preaching or Church music. A licence so given would not be withdrawn except for such grave misconduct as would justify the removal of an incumbent from his benefice. This would introduce among the clergy a distinction somewhat resembling that which

exists among barristers, between King's Counsel and the Junior Bar. The ministerial status of a priest would then be determined by his possession or otherwise, not of a benefice, but of a licence. A clergyman who could not obtain such a licence would remain, as he would deserve to do, in a subordinate position.

The adoption of such a plan would not entail so sweeping a change in our present system as might be supposed. During the last seven years there have been a little over 4,000 ordinations. Allowing for some deaths and removals to foreign service, there must be nearly 3,500 clergymen who would be available as assistant curates, as at present. The change would mainly affect the large churches, which would become collegiate in their character, for their "canon-curacies" would no doubt be confined to men holding this special qualification. And the system would have the enormous advantage that, under it, every clergyman would know that the attainment of an independent position would be determined by the possession, not of interest with patrons, but of qualification in himself. The effect of this in encouraging the efficient and eliminating the incapable candidates for ordination can hardly be over estimated.

A strong argument in favour of this course is that it could be adopted by the action of the Bishops without resort to legislation. The granting and withdrawal of a curate's licence rests with the Bishop alone—with the single exception of the case of a new vicar, to which reference has been made. In these cases the Bishops could not guarantee the perpetuity of their licence, but the pressure of public opinion and episcopal influence could go a long way to discourage the dismissal of qualified men. In fact, the Bishops could practically secure this result by refusing to license curates where this power had been unreasonably used.

The writer of this paper ventures to suggest this solution of the problem in the hope that its consideration by Churchmen may lead either to its adoption or to the proposal of a better one. It is not to be expected that any scheme will command general approval. The one thing that appears to be certain is that things must not, and cannot, remain as they are.