

Sophia Nugent and the Ministry of Women in the Church.

THE death of Sophia Nugent on the eve of the National Mission left on my heart a pain of peculiar intensity. She left us at a moment when a movement likely to affect our Nation for a long time was nearing its inauguration; and when Christian women were putting forth in temperate and reverend fashion a plea to help the world. She left us, too, when that plea was met with a clamour at once sordid and unkind. She thus departed from us as if with a note of incompleteness in her earthly end. That she had been long and intimately concerned with the advancement of religion in England and in Ireland, and in the Mission field, is known to many besides the many who had the joy of personal knowledge. That she would have used fine gifts and ripe experience to advance the National Mission cannot be doubted. That she would have been one of the women whose activities for the good of souls would have been curbed by the ill-timed clamour of a sacerdotal minority is also certain.

To one who like myself knew her very well for many years, it is a gracious task, almost an act of reparation, to set down some account of her work and character, and to derive thence some reflections on the wider question of the right of women to minister in the Church. For several years she was a member of my congregation at Belgrave Chapel. I thus came into relations with her, varied and intimate, and I am sure that what I set down here will be read by many with a grateful if regretful recollection of a life singularly beautiful and fruitful in good works. I have elsewhere detailed the leading features of her life, and I need now do no more than put the reader in possession of the facts that are required to make the matter intelligible.

Sophia Nugent was of Irish birth. Her family was ancient and distinguished. It traced itself back to periods of that island story which are chequered with sorrow, guilt, and glory. Through life she retained the love for Ireland, for its brilliant children, its wild beauties, its saintly memories, its mountains, lakes, and flowers,

that passion which none but Irish natures can feel for Ireland, and which no Irish nature can ever wholly eradicate from the texture of its life, and its frame. Daffodils from her native village adorned the chamber where she breathed her last. Irish holidays were always the holidays which did her most good. The genius of her native land was traceable in her soft eloquence, her warm sympathies, her tender playfulness, her ardour for all that is adventurous and enterprising in causes great and good. For many years she, with a devoted sister, annually raised a large sum in aid of the poor parishes of the disestablished church. Irish orphanages and Irish schools had warm places in her affection. Without presumption it may be hoped that the name of Sophia Nugent will be added to the illustrious catalogue of saints which from a remote and splendid antiquity has adorned the chronicles of the Irish Church. Her life was passed chiefly in London. It was thence that radiated the many influences that made the modest house in Eaton Terrace so familiar to many who in all ranks loved the Christian cause and laboured for it.

From devout and cultivated parents she received the elements of the Evangelical faith. Teachers of eminence helped her mind to expand in many directions. Social opportunities peculiarly fortunate added polish and breadth of view. Thus to the service of her Lord she brought treasures both natural and acquired, which, collected with care and preserved with discretion, were spent during many years with a liberal abundance. She might have been a second Catharine Marsh or a second Florence Nightingale, had her circumstances led elsewhere than they did. In the circumstances, however, which were allotted to her by Providence, she shone with mild and mellow lustre not less beautiful or beneficent than that which was shed by those more notable women. Thousands heard her speak, read her books, felt the personal spell or indirect influence of her character, and will in the last and best of days rise and call her blessed.

But her interests were not confined to Ireland. She worked strenuously for the Y.W.C.A. She was a recognized authority on its Council. When in later years she joined herself to the congregation of my dear friend, the Rev. C. A. Fox, at Eaton Chapel, she threw herself into the women's work with all the ardour of her nature. The C.M.S. Auxiliary of Eaton Chapel became her special

department of the work. The Auxiliary has survived the demolition of the Chapel, and is still a flourishing organization with an annual income of near four hundred. At Keswick she was a notable figure. She took in many ways a part in that movement which has so powerfully aided the deepening of spiritual life. She was, in fact, what some of the habituées of Keswick are not, a living advertisement of its joy and its reality. It is not strange that a life so full of spirituality of many kinds, should suggest to the thoughtful Christian the inquiry, can there be any reason why such women as Sophia Nugent should be debarred from exercising spiritual gifts, under sanction and guidance, in the places of worship set apart for spiritual purposes?

The feminist question is ubiquitous. The women of the world are feeling after a fuller recognition in all spheres of life. Is the Church of Christ alone to shut the gates of mercy on womankind? What the views of Sophia Nugent were on this question I do not know. I do know that she is another of the many women whose virtues, graces, and talents have for three generations conspicuously done much to relieve the misery, dishonour, and injustice of the world. The very reserve and comparative seclusion of her life only adds weight to the argument which it suggests. To associate her with revolutionary and violent methods would be equally absurd and malevolent. I trust, therefore, that no one will suspect me of exploiting a name connoting all that is modest and womanly, if taking her story as the point of departure, I proceed to discuss large issues belonging very closely to what belonged most closely to her.

THE CHURCHMAN has consistently supported a view of this subject which is at once generous and just. It has advocated that women should be heard in their own defence of a plea which is, *prima facie*, reasonable and good. It has not, indeed, committed itself to any definite policy, but it has refused to be cowed by a clamour combining in itself the evils of reaction and timidity. It has not figured before the world as the sponsor of Evangelical orthodoxy on this matter, but it has decisively declined to allow to pass unchallenged the claim of those who pose as the national guardians of Catholic order.

Let me recall the facts. When on the eve of the National Mission some Bishops gave a modified and conservative sanction to women

to conduct specific services in Church during the period of the Mission, and when two of the Bishops marked for exceptional courage and insight appeared to enlarge that sanction to the widest limits possible under the circumstances, there arose first ominous mutterings, and then a clamour extremely violent and minatory in its terms. The cry was sent out that unless the sanction was withdrawn the National Mission would be wrecked, and that the opponents would do all that they could to wreck the Mission. The Episcopate wavered. The two Bishops who were in the van withdrew their sanction in the interests of peace and efficiency. The victory for the hour remained with a reactionary minority styling itself the guardian of the Church's primitive deposit. Many of us regretted the retreat of the Bishops. But we must allow that the Bishops are in a much better position than we can be to say how far the recalcitrants were in a position to damage the National Mission so seriously, that to persist in the quarrel would have been more than impolitic.

We are, however, in a position to examine the arguments by which these recalcitrants supported their hostility to the ministry of women in the Church. In any case the Mediæval Recalcitrants have been responsible for largely denationalizing the National Mission. They have silenced the representatives of more than half of the members of the Church. At any time this would have been a mischief. At the present time the mischief is largely augmented, because the claim put forth by Christian women to be allowed to help the National Mission under official sanction was made at a time when the women of the world are everywhere coming to their own. By silencing women now, the Church has tacitly admitted that she is out of harmony with a mighty movement distinctive of our era. The Church has thus once more dug a chasm between herself and the mind of the age.

The Mediæval Recalcitrants have done even worse than this. They have, by their adhesion to a sectional view of the Church, made the Church an ally of the masculine spirit which, in its Prussian form, has deluged the earth with torrents of blood and tears. They have done worse, even, than this. They have helped to identify the Church of England with the spirit and the policy of the Roman Pontiff. He and his celibate clergy have for centuries been fighting to maintain their control over the Church, its life, and its doctrines,

against all interference and every rival. In actual if not in overt sympathy with Roman views, the sacerdotal opponents of women's ministry in the Church have once more successfully resisted the endeavour to grant a claim which, if granted, would certainly tend to diminish the exclusive prerogatives of what is called the priesthood. If the fruit of this unfortunate interposition is not to have quenched the Spirit, is not to have damped down the fires of purity, power and tenderness, at a moment when the world is aching with brute selfishness of male force, the mercy of God alone will have saved us from the disaster.

While I am bound to believe that the retreat of the Bench was strategic, and that in September last they gave way in order to avert what appeared to be a greater danger from the National Mission, yet I surmise that probably other motives co-operated. Full agreement on the merits of women's ministry was probably not reached. Fears, too, existed, lest if an inch were given an ell would be taken. Misgivings, too, may have been entertained as to the arguments in favour that could be drawn from antiquity and from Scripture. The fear that if the sanction were adhered to, women would take all sorts of unauthorized liberties in Church, was unworthy and without a vestige of evidence. There was, indeed, said to exist a correspondence revealing a conspiracy to capture the priesthood. But the conspiracy was either a bogus one, or seems to have been got up by persons small and of no reputation. Good and gifted women enjoying a Bishop's sanction to speak in Churches on some subjects at some times, will certainly avail themselves of that sanction without incurring the suspicion that they are only using the sanction as an excuse for speaking in Churches on all subjects at all times. To doubt this is to identify the seed of the serpent with the daughters of Eve.

I am not advocating a women's priesthood. That is to say, I am no advocate for a feminine presbyterate. Priesthood in the New Testament means a character and a grace conferred on the Christian believer by Holy Baptism. It belongs equally to all; it cannot be conferred except by the Christian body, and it cannot be withdrawn except by the body which conferred it. In this sacred function women no less than men participate. This is what St. Paul means when he says that in Christ Jesus there is no male and female. When St. Peter says, "Ye are a royal priesthood," he includes both

sexes ; just as when he says, " Ye are a people of God's special possession," he includes all classes.

What is really at stake in the present controversy is this : Have not women some spiritual gifts immediately granted by the Holy Spirit, and is not the Church consequently bound in wisdom, charity and loyalty to recognize those gifts and to find appropriate scope for the exercise of those gifts ?

That from the dawn of the Gospel there has been a succession of women who have ministered in the Church, any tyro in Church history knows well. That succession stretching, with scarcely a break, from Priscilla and Phoebe and the Elect Lady, to Madame Kruedner and Catharine Marsh, bears solemn witness to the sacred right of the sex to serve the Saviour. Justin, the Broad Churchman of the second century, acknowledges that both sexes served the Church in his day. Tertullian, a few decades later than Justin, witnesses to the same fact. The Montanist heresy to which that illustrious Christian at last succumbed was partly redeemed from fault by the recognition which it gave to the ministry of women. Monica had no small share in the training of St. Augustine. Paula ministered to St. Jerome. Women of noble status and piety like St. Hilda, St. Hildegard, St. Katharine of Sienna, St. Bridget of Ireland, Jeanne of Orleans, lighted the dark annals of the Middle Ages. The beautiful succession is prolonged through Jeanne D'Albret, Lady Jane Grey, the mother of George Herbert, Mère Angélique, Madame Guyon, the mother of the Wesleys, Hannah More, Elizabeth Fry, Mrs. Sewell, Florence Nightingale, Sister Dora, Miss Beale. These are but a selection of the names that most readily recur.

But they are but samples ; they are not exhaustive. Belonging to different forms of the faith, serving the Church in different ways, conspicuously animated with the love of the one Lord, and filled with the gifts of His Spirit, these are but representative of that innumerable throng of devoted women, who in all parts of the Church and at all times of its history have served the world as domestic saints, as missionaries, as teachers, as ministrants to sick bodies and suffering souls, as district visitors, as social leaders, almoners of wealth. To ignore this body of evidence is not less a folly than a wrong. To distort or to evade its bearing on the point now under discussion is part of the discreditable tactics which are

alleged to mark the debates of theologians.. The truth is that there never has been an age when the Church has not somehow acknowledged the ministry of women. It follows from this, that to advance a claim that women may minister in things divine in the Church of England to-day is to claim no more than what the Church has always conceded, and to infringe in no way primitive or catholic order.

We are not, however, all equally solicitous about conforming to the models and measures of the past. Antiquity, indeed, has its lawful claims. Futurity has its claims also. The coming years will bring new wants. The vanished years supplied their own necessities as they best could; it is ours to prepare to meet the fresh emergencies as best we may. There are in Christianity developments no less than fixtures. To the living hand of past goodness we owe ourselves gratefully indebted. But to the dead hand of past errors, makeshifts, expedients, we are under no obligation at all. In the delicate arbitration between the claims of the past and the needs of the future, we turn for guidance to the living oracles of God. Here our mediæval opponents are weak. They must always be weak, for they hold a doctrine about Scripture which is alternately rigid and fluid according as their difficulties lead them to want a loose or a tight rein.

The strength of the contention of those who advocate the rights of women to minister in the Church is at its highest in Holy Scripture. The Old Testament offers examples of that ministry in Miriam, in Deborah, in Huldah, in the wife of Isaiah. The mother of the Baptist and Anna the widowed prophetess who spoke of our Lord to all who looked for Redemption in Jerusalem, continue the succession. The Blessed Virgin herself has left in the Magnificat a sample of woman's utterance rich and venerable in an eminent degree. It would therefore have been strange, if, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit should have been silent on a theme so momentous, and have broken in upon a catena so illustrious. But the very first announcement of the prophetic spirit in the new dispensation is that the outpouring of the Holy Ghost shall be equal on men and women, on daughters as well as on sons, on bondmaidens as well as on bondmen of the Lord. Neither sex nor station was to be a bar to the fullness of the Holy Spirit. The prophecy of Joel is the Magna Charta of woman under the Gospel. Standing where it does, and

being what it is, nothing can abrogate or alter that great declaration. The by-laws of St. Paul must be taken in its light, and be included in its scope. No silences in the sacred narrative can prohibit what first prophet and then apostle declare to be the hall-mark of Christianity.

Prophecy is an inalienable right inherent in every Christian; it is part of the seal of the Spirit which adheres unto the day of Redemption. Like every Christian right, this must be exercised with decorum and charity; it must not infringe the peace and order of the Church. It must not be abused to ends frivolous or vain. But it is there, and none can restrain it without risking the grieving of the Holy Spirit of God. This fact duly considered is really decisive. I am astonished that it has not been more generally acknowledged. The reason for its not being so is not far to seek.

Among the postulates of modern rationalism none is more foolish than that which assumes the inferiority of St. Peter to St. Paul. The truth is that the apostle Peter was at least as clear-seeing and as far-seeing as his brother apostle of the Gentiles. There is no passage in all the writings of St. Paul that is more profound, elevated and world-wide than these words of St. Peter, "There is no other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved." There is no utterance of St. Paul recorded in the Acts which sees so far into the future as does the announcement of St. Peter, "Whom the heavens must receive until the times of the restoration." There is no passage in St. Paul which can for a moment be held to alter the Petrine declaration made on the day of Pentecost, "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy."

By-laws made by St. Paul at Corinth or elsewhere for temporary or local exigences are to be interpreted by it, not it by them. Doing this, we shall avoid the unscholarly shifts of exegesis which try to explain away his regulations about women keeping silent in Church.

It is, however, by no means certain that the great apostle to the Gentiles did direct that women should never speak or teach. In the epistle to Titus, indeed, he expressly commands that women shall be teachers of what is good and beautiful; at least to their younger sisters. In the second epistle to Timothy he reminds him what he owed to a faithful mother and grandmother for teaching him the Old Testament Scriptures, and for thus training him in the wisdom of salvation. In the first epistle to Timothy he gives direc-

tions how women should act when admitted to the office and work of the Diaconate. In the epistle to the Philippians he commends as objects of special care those women who had shared with him in the ministry of the Gospel. From the first epistle to the Corinthians are usually cited a few expressions on which the opponents of women's ministry rely most obstinately for their resistance to any change in the customary order of things. I incline to believe that throughout that epistle the word "woman" always means a married woman. There is in Greek one word which means equally woman and wife. This word is *Gunee*. In classical Greek of course there are many terms to express the difference, but in the Greek Testament this one word does duty for both the ideas. This rule of interpretation must, I think, be strictly applied to the first epistle of the Corinthians. When, in this epistle, St. Paul meant to distinguish between married and unmarried women, he does so by using the terms appropriate to each condition of the sex. This is well illustrated by a study of the seventh chapter of the epistle. This exegesis eases the situation for those who maintain that women who have the prophetic gift are not forbidden by St. Paul to exercise that gift. It also clears the apostle's reputation of some foolish slanders, invented by rationalists and repeated by believers who ought to have known better.

I have endeavoured in this article to refute the allegations of those, whose untimely and ignorant clamour caused the Bishops to recede from a position which, if maintained, would have put the Church into more close and living touch with a great movement widely diffused through the world and destined soon to dominate social progress. I have shown that both antiquity and Scripture are friendly to the cause of the ministry of women in the Church, and that therefore the aspirations of good women to-day to help the Church, especially at a time of National Mission, is legitimate, and essentially Christian. I have traced the succession of women ministering in divine things from the early days of the Jewish Church and passing down without break to our own age. I have specially emphasized that St. Paul does not really differ in this matter from St. Peter and the rest of the sacred writers. I have endeavoured to show that the claim that women should minister in Church is a part of the Pentecostal deposit, and that to resist that claim must be a very serious form of the sin of grieving the Holy Spirit of God Who has sealed His people till the day of Redemption. This is

clear from a candid reading of St. Peter's use of the prophecy of Joel in his sermon on the first Whit-Sunday, and is therefore coeval with Christianity itself.

The ministry of women is of course only a part of the larger question of the ministry of the laity. The hostility to the ministry of women is only a part of the hostility to lay ministry in general, always ready to spring to the front when the interests of the sacerdotal order seem to be menaced. I have no doubt that the battle of the future will be fought over this question in the area of theology. But at long last the laity will come to their own ; and with the laity Christian women will recover the right to exercise the gifts which has never indeed been overtly abrogated, but which has lived on in the Church with a precarious and fitful existence.

In the meantime something has been gained by the efforts and examples of holy women like Sophia Nugent. Their noble lives and saintly deaths show how sordid and shabby are the grounds on which are supposed to rest the opposition to the ministry of such women. These grounds are seen to be little better than an ungenerous prejudice. That blessed Lord Who ascended on high to give gifts to men will not finally allow His own purposes to be frustrated by the well-meant but ignorant opposition of some of His servants to the work of saintly women, who in private have for years edified His Church, and now seek some public sanction for the wider and fuller mode of ministering to the Lord Whom they love and to the souls for whom He died.

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