

Parochial Vignettes.

IV. OUR BRETHREN THE LAITY.

PERHAPS it would be better if a Layman himself discussed this subject rather than a mere Parson who is more than likely to lean towards his caste and to print his prejudices. Only it will occur to most people that the Layman is likely to have his prejudices too and, if he have suffered, probably his hostilities as well. Moreover, he will only be able to see one side of the subject, whereas the Parson, having himself been once upon a time a Layman, and mingling with Laymen all his life, can see both sides. Besides, knowing his personal prepossessions, he can be on his guard against them, and in his honesty will at least try to keep the scales from tilting. And so I venture to launch out upon a somewhat stormy sea, and, with many rocks ahead, to say my say on the burning topic of Our Brethren the Laity. Our Sisters the Laity is quite another subject.

And, first, a few general facts about the Laity. That they are as much a portion of the Church of Christ as the Clergy is the first great outstanding fact in which we shall all agree. The popular expression that a man who is ordained "goes into the Church" is utterly untrue, inasmuch as he is in the Church already, so that the Parson is not more "in the Church" than the Layman. Whatever some Laymen may think, and whatever some Parsons may claim, neither is superior to the other in the point of Church membership.

And the Layman is a priest, too, being a member of that kingdom of which all members are priests, yea, "a royal priesthood." Neither does he surrender his priesthood when he accepts the ministries of an ordained man. The Parson represents him; that is all. They are spiritual equals.

There are differences, of course, but they lie not here, nor in the question of character and attainable holiness of the two, for office carries no character with it of necessity.

Just as clear too is the fact that the Layman has a distinct right to place and power in the Church of Christ. He is not intended to be ruled out as an inferior, to be displaced from his lawful position, or to be treated as a baby for whom all is done without his consent or co-operation. Our Brethren the Laity are many, while the

Parson is one. He is there on their behalf, and he certainly has no monopoly of wisdom. On all such scores the Laity do well not to consent to be relegated to an obscure corner, or to be expected to swallow all that the Parson sets before them with their eyes shut.

The Laity, too, will not forget that their interests come first, that Church and ministry exist for their spiritual good, and that apart from the Laity all is meaningless. It is they who constitute the Church in that particular place and not the building or the Clergy or the Church Universal. So that if the Parson ignores them, or hurts them by innovations against which their highest principles revolt, or if he plays the tyrant in spiritual things, it is they who have the right to rise in insurrection. Of course, I am speaking of the Laity as a whole, and not of some crotchety individual who thinks that all are outraged because he is.

All these plain facts are not disputed, I believe, by anybody, lay or clerical, and if they have been forgotten or relegated to some obscure corner it is well to drag them into the full light and keep them there, for they are the charter of our Brethren the Laity. The best way to keep the peace in the Church is to maintain our rights.

It will be of advantage, I think, in the clearing of our subject to deal with a few common mistakes about the lay brethren of our Church ; mistakes which are not only common but pernicious.

They are supposed, for one thing, to lack interest in religious things. And outward appearances would almost seem to confirm the idea. They fight shy of the Clergy, and keep a steady reserve on religious topics in their presence. They are infrequent in their attendance at church. They seem wholly immersed in secularities. They even indulge in queer little smiles when others contend for this theological side or that. But appearances are ever deceitful, and the Parson who holds the opinion that our Brethren the Laity are indifferent to religious matters is wrong. They are not so silent on such subjects at home or in the company of their fellows. They read books quite recondite on deep subjects. They think more than they say about eternal things. And we may be assured that no fiction, however widespread among the Clergy, is more false. They may be, and are, uninterested in our clerical niceties, but on the deeper aspects of religion itself they feel more concerned than we know.

Then they are supposed to be shallow in their religious judg-

ments, and to be very babes in theological depths. And, were it not so sad, it would be a ridiculous position to assume. Why, there are men in our congregations listening to the crude discourses of ill-read Clergy who have thought far more deeply and read far more widely than the preacher himself has ever done. Run your eye over their bookshelves, and you will be surprised. Tap their minds on subjects of science and literature and their bearing on religious questions, and more surprises are in store. In truth, to many a Layman it is the Clergy who are the babes. It is humbling, but it is true.

Then it is supposed that their silence spells agreement, and that because they make no protests they consent to things parochial and ecclesiastical. But a great deal of revolt can lurk under a calm demeanour, and many of our Laymen are not so acquiescent as they seem to be under new *régimes* and novelties in doctrine and ceremonial. Our British Layman is long-suffering and tolerant to a degree, but there comes a time when the flash-point is reached and the inevitable explosion occurs. He just lets things go until they become intolerable, and then he "lets out" to the offender's extreme surprise.

There is one feature about our more intelligent Laity which is also a matter of misunderstanding. We Clergy do not see clearly enough that they have as a rule a greater breadth of thought than professional religionists. They give hospitality to theories and views which the Clergy call by hard and intolerant names. I do not mean that they believe them, but that they are quite willing to give them a hearing, and to test their value. They do not reject on sight, or refuse to consider what their Parsons condemn. They keep their minds open longer than the Cleric, and insist on giving the stranger a modified welcome. It may be playing with fire; it often is. But it certainly gives the man acquaintance with the depths of a subject which must be unknown to the more superficial glance. Now and then our plain lay brother breaks silence and publishes a book, and those who knew him, as they thought, well are surprised at the depth and illumination of the offspring of a mind which they deemed dormant and unconcerned. It is clear that we Clergy will have to revise some of our misapprehensions concerning our Brethren the Laity.

All this preliminary talk leads naturally to a question which

is bound to be asked and answered, and that is, What shall we do with our Laity ?

It is not merely the question of crushing a quite lawful discontent, but of using a power which the Church needs. No Layman cares to have a conciliatory sop thrown to him to keep him quiet, but, having powers which the Clergy lack, he naturally wants to be of service to the Church he really cares for at the bottom. We Clergy are very much like some of the old monarchs who, preferring to keep government in their own hands, fought for long against admitting their subjects to a share in constitutional affairs. And certain it is that, having gained a voice in the State, they are not to be denied it for long in Church affairs and Parochial Councils. And so we ask again, What shall be done with our Brethren the Laity ?

Well, as it is the Layman's Church as well as the Clergy's, treat him as a partner. That is all. Give him the chance of using his undoubted gifts. He is a better man of affairs than most of the Clergy, and he has business instincts which we have had little chance of acquiring. His common sense is not clouded by prepossessions such as ours. Tied and bound with conservative notions, fond of power and supremacy, we fancy foolishly that we shall be shelved by a too energetic Layman and reduced to impotence in our own preserves. These are idle fears. Why are we not equally afraid of crushing out his rights and silencing his voice ? This is the present danger. If we want to have lay echoes of ourselves in the parish we shall be obliged to seek out lay nonentities, and this will leave us in a worse position than before.

The truth is that our parochial danger lies infinitely more from idle, unemployed Laymen than from the busy ones. Leave them nothing to do, and their powers for mischief may develop, but keep them hard at it, and their charity will enlarge, and any dangerous qualities that lurk in the background will be stifled for want of material to keep them alive. It is the idle who are the worst critics.

Neither should we be content to give them only office work. As treasurers, secretaries, and members of committees they will shine, but some of our gifted spiritual Laymen are capable of higher work, having distinct spiritual powers. A wise Parson will seek to discover and develop these, and will see that some sphere for their exercise may be given them. Let him lay aside all fears of a possible rival in his own domain. If they clash, which can only hap-

pen if the Parson be too sensitive and self-centred, a wise Layman will see the danger and avoid it.

Let the lay brethren be consulted in meditated changes in the parish or the Church. It is better to consult them before a change than to be obliged to fight them after it has been made. Changes can only be healthy when there is a healthy public opinion in a parish to sustain them. For the Parson to change on his own initiative is only to invite dissensions and mischief. The Church is not the Clergyman's but the Church of the parish, and to ignore sensitive souls by pin-pricking changes is to nullify his influence for the whole tenure of his ministry in the place. Nobody cares to be ridden over either rough-shod or in felt slippers. It is the ignoring of their wishes, the hurting of their susceptibilities, which they resent.

The only atmosphere in which to grow good parochial plants is the atmosphere of good-will and harmony and full accord. Storms and frosts are disastrous and ruinous. And this atmosphere is generated by a mutual good-will between a Parson and his people fostered by mutual confidence.

It is probable that I have been conveying the idea that the fault is mostly on the side of the Parson for any friction which occurs between the Parson and his Brethren the Laity. Let me hasten to erase that impression in part. No doubt, it often is so, but it is by no means always so. The Laymen must bear their fair share of the blame too, if you please. Not all Laymen are easy to work with. Not all are of that pleasant sort who can collide against you without hurting. Some are undoubtedly queer and cantankerous to a degree.

Let us pass a few of the more difficult of this sort in review.

The Squire is often a considerable help to the Parson, and will stand by him in all weathers. But sometimes he is of quite another complexion. A small king in his way, the monarch of all he surveys, appointing the Parson himself perhaps, constant deference being paid him on all hands, yet a resolute Parson may prove too much for him. And resolute the Parson must be when the spiritual preserve is attempted to be shot over as well as his own secular ones. Tact will go a long way, a gentleman and a Christian will yield whenever possible, and trifles will not be magnified by a wise Vicar. But, given all this, a point may come where the tension will be too

great and too vital, and a rupture will ensue. Here is a use for the Bishop, to appoint the assailed man to another sphere, if possible, for it is no edifying spectacle this of a Squire and a Parson lodged in the same little spot at loggerheads.

Tyranny of a similar kind may easily come when some big subscriber who, having been wont to call for the tune because he paid the piper, calls too loudly and too tyrannously. It is the merit of our good Church of England that money as a rule does not make a bid for the mastery in our parishes, and, if it did, has not the same chance of success as in some more dependent body. But there are exceptions. Parishioners are very human, and there are few who will not welcome the services of some big giver to save their pockets. It is a kind of parochial suicide to do so, for they are giving up their manhood and their independence, to say nothing of putting shackles on the wrists of their Parson. For the day is sure to come when, the will of the big subscriber being thwarted, he rounds on the unhappy parish by threatening to withdraw his subscriptions. Squirming under the threat, they shamefacedly sidle away from the Parson, who in their heart of hearts they love and admire for his courage in resisting tyranny, and leave him. And then he leaves them, if he be a wise man, for the day of his usefulness has closed in that place. He might stay and fight it out, but it is better not to strive. And the man of money stays and crows, believing himself to be a conqueror rather than a bully.

But there are managing lay brothers who are neither Squires nor big subscribers, but who by long wont have climbed into the seat of the driver, and have so long held the reins that they find a difficulty in giving them up even to the lawful driver. And woe betide the poor Parson who finds himself in the predicament of being made one of the team in his own new parish. There are elements here of a pretty quarrel, which the most peaceable man in the world can scarcely refuse, unless at a payment too large for honesty and independence to pay. And the first act of independence will be the first spark in the powder barrel. The managing brother, strong in his integrity, will be outraged and surprised, and will proceed to put him in the wrong for all that he is worth. And because explanations are lengthy, and the people know him better than they know the Parson, and because they have been so long used to the *régime* of the lay brother, the victory will probably lie with him as he

shakes the dust from his violated feet and leaves the Church to see what the parish will do without him. Of course the Parson will live it down, but it is probable that for many years the sparks from that first collision will fly about.

In every parish, too, there is sure to be an opposition like the House of Commons. The Vicar, being a mature man, we will say, has his theological prepossessions already fixed; and so have his parishioners. He cannot possibly agree with all. And so he will be either too high, or not Evangelical enough, or too broad, or too changeable. Theology is everybody's subject, and the washerwoman prides herself on knowing as much about truth as the Parson. And when he comes among his new people he finds himself in constant collision with somebody's views, and all their owners, being quite convinced that they are right and he is wrong, keep him in perpetual hot water. Curiously enough, the greatest friction will come from those who are nearest to the Parson in opinion, just as relations or members of the same family when they quarrel do so more rancorously than unrelated neighbours. There is, to be sure, a way of keeping the peace and allaying opposition, and that is by being dead and insensitive to truth at all, or by playing the hypocrite and concealing your real views, making it your business to reflect everybody's views in turn. But then the possibility of being found out must be a constant dread. It is this certain bitterness of religious faction which puts sharp thorns in the parson's pillow and poisons his parochial cup.

Conservatives of the stiffer sort are often found among our Brethren the Laity who insist on always keeping the same level, the same colour, the same practice. The slightest suspicion of change, and they are up in arms. Thus, some parishes have been thrown into a convulsion by the very suggestion that it might improve the service if they sang David's Psalms in David's way. But not a bit of it. It is the thin edge of the wedge. We smile to-day as we remember the old struggle over the question of the black gown or the surplice. Every change which has brightened our services to-day has been won in the teeth of the bitterest opposition. Conservatism is an excellent drag, but it was never meant to overturn the coach or to stop its progress altogether. If a Parson be mad enough to head for a precipice, then on with every drag you have, but on matters which involve no principle it means nothing

but obstinacy to oppose changes. But no Parson is thoroughly trusted. The Conservative watchdog is ready to bay out at the least movement which implies a change. And not infrequently he barks at and bites the wrong man.

Face to face with Conservatives in our parish life we have the mild or headlong Reformer. He is all for changes, changes frequently, unwelcome changes. He wants to improve the services and run with the fashions in ecclesiastical millinery. Sometimes he wants to change in a more Protestant direction and to make the services simpler, as he would put it, but balder, as others would express it. Any way our Reformer is somewhat of an Anarchist, and heads towards a general upset of present conditions in order that he may build something which he thinks preferable. He fancies that out of the whirlwind which lays prostrate all that is familiar and old he may pluck something which he fancies is æsthetically or prosaically superior. And, being a bold fellow, he is ever to the front at Vestry meetings, and urging on his pet ideas at all costs. By and by, he gets a party around him, and, if the Parson be malleable, bit by bit he gets his way, and soon a stranger coming back to his old parish will wonder whether the Reformation has not been reversed and the Pope in possession, or, on the other hand, whether Geneva has not come back with its Puritan ways. It is astonishing what one bold Layman with a steady push will achieve in a parish of molluscs, and where the Parson has lost his backbone.

Sometimes the adverse lay element takes the form of unspirituality which, combined with ecclesiasticism, makes a sad mixture in the parochial cup. A spiritual Parson set over against this type of man will meet with some hard rubs. The external will fight to the death against the internal, and the moment the Parson tries to get below the surface this lay brother will promptly set up his back. His ideal is social, and he feels that the world must be dragged in neck and shoulders to aid and abet the welfare of the church and parish. Concerts, dances, card-parties, lotteries, and the whole kit of the world are to make the parish "go." And, if he gets his way, it does go . . . to the Devil. With this element in his midst, the Parson will find his Brother the Layman a continual opponent, and they will spring as far asunder as the poles.

It would be easy to multiply these lay cranks and oddities, but I

should be sorry to leave the impression that these form the staple of our Brethren the Laity. They are the exception, decidedly, but an exception, in such prominence and evidence that they seem to be more numerous than they are. And undoubtedly their power for discomfort is greater than that of any number of loyal, helpful friends is for good.

Neither are they as a rule such as may not be won over by patience, gentleness, tact and prayer. But they require careful handling, and only a clever, wise man can hope to steer their energies into pleasanter channels. Nettles can be handled with impunity by those who grasp them firmly, and it must never be forgotten that most of these angular Laymen mean well, have real goodness at the bottom of them, are like good watchdogs more ready with bark than bite, and are only noxious because they want to be very faithful and to scotch heresies and the beginnings of evil. And so, if we can only win their confidence and friendship, we shall often find them the very best of energetic helpers and the most loyal. If we can only suppress resentment and anger, and listen well, and, as far as conscience will allow, take their criticisms in good part, show them that we appreciate their interest in the parish and will be glad of their help, and give them something to do, we shall find that such treatment will avail much. But now and then our brother the Layman will have nothing but war, and war to the knife, and then the only thing to do is to let him alone and let him rage.

And what he will do can be pretty well anticipated.

He will probably try to make a party against the poor Parson, and gather as many irreconcilables together as he can. And he must be a man of poor resources who cannot raise a rattling battle-cry and invent some glaring banner of revolt.

If a Curate of feeble and disloyal nature be on the parochial premises, he will run him against the Vicar, pat him on the head and aggravate his grievances until they become a veritable revolt. And then is seen a parish divided against itself; one of the most unhappy of spectacles.

Of course, he will withdraw his subscriptions and seek to starve the parish funds. Should he be a wealthy rebel, this will be a serious matter, as he very well knows.

Very probably he will leave the church severely alone, and either

attend some rival one, unless it happens to be too far away, or else go to chapel.

And in many other ways which his ingenuity will invent he will try to starve the Parson out, or make things so uncomfortable that he will cut and run. It is all very malicious and very petty, but in a little parish one unkindly disposed man can do much damage to religion and peace. Then it is that we may thank God for our independence as a Church, for the little endowment there may be, and for the many who are left true and staunch to fill up the empty place. There is a healthy common sense in most parishes which sees where the right lies, and, however silent men's voices may be, they will show by their suggestive silence that though they cannot safely speak they are still friendly and sympathetic and understanding.

One last word or two to our Brethren the Laity. I have been speaking about them ; now let me speak directly to them.

I have tried to show your power for good or for evil. You know it for yourselves. I have tried to point out the legitimacy of your rights, and the propriety of your standing up for them. But, in your zeal for your rights, be heedful that you do not trample on the rights of others. And, above all, let the Parson's peculiar province be left to him and not invaded. There will be no differences if we all keep to our own line of metals. Give him credit for good intentions, and do not suspect too quickly. If you have your doubts about him, have them out quietly and courteously face to face, and until then put your finger on your lips and be silent. Half the suspected things of life are innocent both in their intentions and meaning. Give him the benefit of the doubt. Be careful not to magnify trifles and make mountains out of molehills. Remember in your zeal for orthodoxy that truth has many sides, and that he may be insisting on the side that is least familiar to you and therefore more necessary than you think. It is quite possible that you are fathering your Parson with views that he does not hold and forcing upon him conclusions that he has never thought of drawing from them. The same truths can be expressed very differently according to the mind through which they have passed, and yet they are the same truths. Remember too how difficult it is to listen correctly and to remember the turn of phrase which was used for the conveyance of the truth which you suspect to be outraged or denied. If in doubt,

go and ask him what he did say, and stop the wrong impression quickly. Perhaps you are too sensitive and too ready to take offence over trifles. Perhaps you are prone to a vivid imagination. Such a tendency is provocative of much misery to all. Do not surrender yourself to its alarms. A bit of real charity will work wonders in such cases. Half the troubles in life, parochial and personal, come from a too lively imagination. It is well not to jump to conclusions too hastily. Sleep over them. Things get balanced in course of time. More light comes as we wait for it to come. If you suffer from self-importance do not permit it to live. It is the fruitful parent of a bad offspring. Take a better measure of yourself. Humble people rarely take offence. If they are not consulted, they do not mind. If they are overlooked, they think it was a lapse of memory only. Neglect does not hurt them because they do not expect to be kow-towed to. They are a poor target to hit and hurt just because they do not expose themselves broadside on. And, whatever you do, keep on high ground. One is your Master, even Christ, not the parish or its Vicar or any council in the parish, but higher by far. And, realizing that, your ambition will be to bring glory to Him, to advance His Church and to lighten the burdens of His children your brethren in Christ. Littlenesses vanish when you get high enough, and, with the far horizon stretching out beyond you, you will not think so much of the many disturbing things of mundane life as of the great features of the eternal Kingdom.

A glorious sphere have our Brethren the Laity, a sphere which none but they can fill, and if all were as good and diligent as some are we should soon see prosperity abounding in our parishes and in the great world of human life.

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[The next article in this series—"Our Sisters the Laity"—will appear in the May number.]

