

The Priesthood of the Laity.¹

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ONE of the most eminent and significant notes characterizing the course of Christian history is the gradual encroachment by the clerisy upon the privileges and powers of the laity. The original purpose of Christ and His Apostles, as far as we can learn from the records of their teachings which have come down to us, was to break down the old distinctions between things sacred and secular, meats clean and unclean, affairs spiritual and civil, days and seasons consecrated to God and days and seasons practically kept apart from Him. The New Testament makes it clear that the religion of our Lord was meant to be a religion equally for all men, at all times, in all places, and through all things. The old religions were sectional, compartmental religions. The religion of Christ is comprehensive and all-embracing. It leaves nothing and nobody out. It takes everybody and everything in. It intends the State and nation to be holy as the churches: the people to be sacred as the priests; work to be done as worship; eating and drinking to be to the glory of God concurrently with fasting and praying. The promise of Christ was not that He would be with His disciples on Sundays alone, but all the days; not that His presence should attend their worship only in consecrated buildings or at selected seasons, but anywhere, everywhere, and always where two or three are gathered together in His name to worship the Father in spirit and in truth. All things and all men in all places and at all times were according to Christ to be subject to the sovereignty of God: because it is a cardinal tenet of His religion that in God and through God and for God all things exist and to Him belong!

The Apostolic Church was thus a truly Catholic, because an all-comprehending, Church. No Church can ever again be equally Catholic unless also it is equally Apostolic and comprehensive. How strait and narrow modern Catholicity is, compared with the Catholicity of Christ and His Apostles is obvious to all who are familiar with the New Testament Scriptures. The atmosphere

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of the New Testament Catholicity is like that of mountain-tops : pure, strong and bracing ; a breath from heaven. The atmosphere of much modern Catholicity, especially of that department which most traffics in the name, is like that of cellars. It is of the earth, earthy : a breath from the nostrils of men, not from the Spirit of God.

The time has now fully come for a firm and even rebellious realization that the course of the Christian Churches has, for many centuries, not been a course ever widening down from great catholicity to a catholicity still greater, but from a catholicity originally true and generous to a catholicity ever more narrow and ever less true. The fount and origin of this non-Catholic contraction may be discovered unmistakably in the first substitution and final replacement of the Church for the Christ, of the Body for the Head, of an institution for a Person, of official priests on earth for the One High Priest Who has passed into the heavens. And to-day, the surest test of the catholicity or non-catholicity of any Church is the relative emphasis which it lays on the Church on the one hand and on Christ on the other. The more frequently and passionately men defer to the Church, the less catholic they are. The more loyally and lovingly they confess the Christ, the more catholic they will assuredly and gloriously become.

It is this frequent substitution of the Church for the Christ which vitiates so much of the teachings of the Fathers, and of the doctrines derived from those teachings : such doctrines as those which confine sacramental grace to sacerdotal channels, or commit the government of Churches and the decisions of doctrines to official priests alone, or exalt the priesthood to the exclusive sovereignty of an absolving and binding caste, and consequently subjugate the laity to their clerical lords. It is, of course, historically interesting to know what the Fathers believed and taught ; partly because they are witnesses to the mighty influence of the Roman Empire upon their beliefs and teachings ; as also because they are an evidence of the immense difficulties found by even the best of early saints to completely disentangle themselves from Jewish traditions and pagan modes of thought. But when all has been said that can be said on behalf of the Fathers, and all possible homage, consistent with truth, gladly and gratefully paid to their opinions, their spiritual discernment and their heroisms ; still none of them, not all taken

together, have the authority of a single apostle, far less of Christ Himself; and the more we find in their writings of the manual transmission of spiritual gifts, or of official restrictions on the validity of God's grace, or of ecclesiastical claims to the spiritual domination of one class of men over another, the more manifest is the distance which separates them from the Divine Founder of their religion, and the more impressive grows the tremendous power which, through the Fathers, paganism and Judaism have exercised over the developments and destinies of the Christian Church. Similarly with Luther's doctrine of consubstantiation and Calvin's autocratic, though most logical and learned institutes. They are no part of the Gospel of God, but are remnants of the scholastic and legalistic teachings of men. The Spirit of God is guaranteed to the Churches as their Guide through all the ages. When, however, either Churches or individuals wander away from the Christ into tracks remote from truth as taught by Him, they are manifestly being led not by the Spirit of God, but by some other spirit.

One of the great duties of the modern age is to restore to Christendom the catholicity of Christ and His apostles. Only by the re-birth of Christ's catholicity can our unhappy divisions be healed and Godly union and concord be substituted in their stead. In this re-birth the laity of the Church are destined to take a very prominent and powerful part. Priestly claims and the priestly temper in every denomination have been the main cause of our divisions. It rests largely with the laity to induce the priests to review their claims in the light of the New Testament, and as a result of that review to restore the universal priesthood of all Christians. From that restoration, and not otherwise, will follow, naturally and of necessity, a genuine apostolic catholicity and reunion of the Churches of Christ.

In a duly organized Church official ministers are clearly requisite and right. We need them for the seemly and sufficient conduct of our services; for the regular, and orderly administration of the Sacraments; for a well-instructed exposition and edifying application of God's Word; for the maintenance of the historic continuity of Church life and order. But, when we accept the teachings of Christ and His Apostles as our guide, we shall discover that the laity are intended to be equally Christians, and as truly disciples of

Christ as the clergy ; and as verily priests unto God and the Father as are the ordained members of the Church. No minister of Christ is, in the New Testament, accorded the title of " priest " in a sacrificial or hierarchic sense. Whenever the word " priest " is used in the New Testament its application is as fitting to the laity as the clergy. No function is conferred on the priest to the abasement of the layman. One of the greatest of the many great messages of the Epistle to the Hebrews is the unique exaltation of the High Priesthood of Christ, and the total abolition in the Christian community of any sacerdotal tribe akin to those of the Levites and Aaronic priests. Even St. Peter, the most Jewish of all the Apostles, and the reputed, though not proven, founder of the most Jewish of all the Christian Churches, declared that all those who have tasted that the Lord is gracious, without any discrimination between ordained and unordained, are built up a spiritual house for a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. They are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, elected, all alike, to show forth the excellences of Him Who hath called them out of darkness into His marvellous light (1 Peter ii. 5, 9).

It is evident, says the Preface to the Anglican Ordinal, that from the Apostles' time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ's Church : Bishops, Priests and Deacons. This clear-cut opinion, however, fuller knowledge tends to modify. The same Preface clearly and calmly sets forth the use and need for the careful ordination of each class of these ministers. But this is a quite different thing from the sacerdotal separation of ministers into a hierarchic caste : or the withdrawal from the laity of that royal priesthood conferred on them by Christ and His Apostles. At their ordination a New Testament or Bible is now given to all Anglican ordinands ; but no paten or chalice as was customary in pre-Reformation times. Our licensed Lay Readers to-day in ever-increasing numbers and with ever-deepening effect are ministering the Word of God ; and the withdrawal of the paten and chalice at the ordination of priests opens out the important and interesting question whether the Anglican ordinal definitely forbids the laity to minister the Sacraments also ? One Sacrament at least the laity are confessedly permitted to minister ; and if both the two Sacraments are generally necessary to Salvation, as the Catechism

declares, then as one Sacrament may be rightly and lawfully administered by the laity, with due and definite safeguards, why not the other ?

I further note three things in this connection : (1) The indefinite alternative use of the words "minister," and "priest" in the Book of Common Prayer is a witness to the transition state of the era in which the book was compiled : and the preference to-day severally attached by men to the one or other of these alternative titles is some slight, though not always sufficient, sign of their inclination to medieval notions of the Christian ministry on the one hand, and to New Testament revelations of its character on the other. (2) It is remarkable that although the sacred volume is handed to the ordinand priests and the paten and chalice are withheld, no small proportion of the Anglican clergy say little of that which is given, though they strongly emphasise that which is withheld. Yet they are equally stewards of both Scriptures and Sacraments, and the fidelity with which they minister the one, whether Scripture or Sacraments, ought not to involve them in negligence of the other. (3) In reading treatises on the origin and character of the Christian ministry it is before all things necessary to compare any statements quoted from the Fathers with the teachings of the New Testament. One ounce of New Testament revelation is worth, and weighs, more than tons of patristic learning. The one is pure gold : the other often much mingled with pagan and Jewish dross. It is this old-world dross which has done the Churches such immeasurable mischief. The Churches of the coming age will demand ever more insistently, and yearningly, the pure gold of God rather than the traditional alloys of men.

Again, it should be carefully observed how large a part in past times ignorance has played in the exaltation of the clergy and the depression of the laity. The clergy were for centuries the only learned and enlightened class ; and much even of their learning then was ignorance compared with that of modern days, and their enlightenment little better than darkness. But such learning and light as then there was belonged almost exclusively to the clergy alone. The laity had little share in it. The clergy managed not only the affairs of the Church but those of the State also. How changed all this now is ! The clergy, although better instructed and more capable as a class now than then, have little, far too

little, to say and do in the direction of State principles and State policies. But if the position of the clergy has been greatly changed, that of the laity has been altogether revolutionised. In ability, education, knowledge, enlightenment, they are fully abreast and no whit behind, the clergy. Even in theology many laymen, and some laywomen, outstrip the average clergyman in solid learning and accurate thinking. Multitudes of them have close acquaintance with the laws of thought and have well-trained judicial minds. In a theological examination, to say nothing of an examination on other subjects, the pew to-day would not infrequently beat the pulpit, and the parishioner well hold his own by the side of the pastor.

These fundamental facts must be vitally and vividly remembered in considering ecclesiastical questions to-day and in framing our plans for the union of the Churches. We must insist on the abandonment of medieval and sectarian notions of catholicity and return to the catholicity of Christ and His Apostles. We must re-conquer and re-establish the Evangelical priesthood of the laity as revealed in the New Testament, yet frequently concealed and sometimes denied in post-apostolic teachings and medieval traditions. We must recognise the mighty advance which the laity have made in modern times in all kinds of knowledge, including Biblical and theological knowledge; in forming sound and accurate judgments; in cultivating clear, definite, scientific ways and habits of thinking, both inductive and deductive; in creating and cherishing lofty ideals of human life and spiritual aspirations after Godlike perfection. In these ideals and aspirations the laity are seldom behind, and are sometimes in advance of the clergy: thus adding another to the many evidences we possess that the Holy Ghost, according to Christ's own promise, guides the laity as well as the clergy in the paths of truth and righteousness. Every Church, therefore, which exalts its clergy at the cost of abasing its laity will, from generation to generation, as knowledge grows and reverence for the Redeemer deepens, find its influence weakening and its authority waning. The laity are always ready, sometimes perhaps over-ready, to treat their clergy deferentially and to pay full homage to their most hallowed office and holy functions. And the more stable the foundations on which the sanctity of this office and the holiness of its functions are built, the

more permanent and worthful will be the regard in which they are universally held. The ministerial priesthood need have no fear of losing esteem by the recovery and re-establishment of the apostolic priesthood of the laity. The more highly exalted the laity spiritually become, the more highly esteemed will the ministerial priesthood become also. It is when the ministerial priesthood builds up its authority on a hay-and-stubble basis, and claims to be an exclusive sacerdotal caste, that it draws nigh to perishing, and when winds blow and rains descend is sure to fall into great ruin.

The remembrance and proper valuation of these facts are, I repeat, necessary to the right solution of many of the pressing religious problems of the present time. They go *e.g.* to the root of the Church and State question. My main objection to the Archbishops' Committee's Report on Church and State is that although it is doubtless well-intentioned, it frequently overlooks or ignores these facts. It too often confuses things ecclesiastical with things spiritual. It confers too much and too exclusive an authority on bishops. It sets apart in different houses the clergy and the laity. It withdraws from the laity all share in the examination and determination of Christian doctrine. It runs contrary to comprehension and catholicity and tends to foster an exclusive and sectarian spirit. Though some great lay names are appended to it, yet it is obviously fashioned in ecclesiastical moulds and intended to promote ecclesiastical notions and ecclesiastical interests. It does not strike a single generous note on behalf of more Christian catholicity. It even goes the length of shearing and clipping our Lord's own most broad sign and loving seal of membership of His Church—at least for purposes of administration and control in the English branch of it—by substituting Confirmation for Baptism as a qualification for the suffrage in Church elections. When the priesthood of the laity is duly acknowledged and the laity are endued with their proper rights and Christian share in the government of the Church such a document as the Archbishops' Committee's Report will, I earnestly trust, become an anachronistic impossibility.

Similarly with the Life and Liberty movement. Like the Archbishops' Committee's Report it is meant well. It displays more strength and breadth, and burns with a brighter light than the Re-

port of the Archbishops' Committee. Its founders and chief leaders are large-minded lovers of the people. Some of them are among our best and most highly esteemed contemporaries. But when they confound Church liberty with liberty from State control they seem to forget both Church history and State sanctity. No Churches have ever been so free and catholic as those in close communion with the State. It was not till after Canossa that the Roman Church could bind its laity in the fetters of transubstantiation and other ecclesiastical chains. The annals of the Roman Church from the time the Empire lost control of it are one long story of the ever-tightening depression of the laity. And as Canon Charles has shown in his remarkable little book on Religious Development (p. 182), "the severance of Church and State was disastrous even to Judaism. . . . All the great work that Judaism did for the world was done when Church and State were one. . . . When the close relation of Church and State was brought to an end Judaism was hopelessly crippled and became a sect, and has remained a sect to the present day."

Few people, I suppose, would contend that the relations of Church and State in England to-day are altogether satisfactory. But which party is at fault? Neither is innocent. Both are culpable. The State does not sufficiently realise the divinity of its origin and obligations. The Church is sometimes bitterly anti-rational and anti-national, arrogantly sectarian, lamentably Roman and anti-catholic. But before the twentieth century closes I hope these faults on both sides will be remedied and that the English Church instead of being disestablished will be re-established on a basis broad enough to include all those within the nation who call themselves Christians and openly confess their allegiance to their Lord.

No Church can be national which is satisfied to continue a sect. A Church can only be, or deserve to be, a National Church which includes all the folds of the flock of Christ within the nation. And my fervent desire is that the Life and Liberty movement will ere long not only open its gates wide enough for all Christians of every denomination to enter thereby into the National Church, but will also draw very definitely a clear distinction between the secular uniformity of ecclesiastical organisation and the sacred unity of spiritual life.

In conclusion I say nothing, though much might be said, of Prayer Book revisions. So far these revisions have been mainly at the will and in the hands of clerical convocations. They have yet to be reviewed by the laity and sanctioned by Parliament. In the course of this review, while I hope that all the good changes will be maintained, yet I trust that the drift of these revisions which has too often been palpably in the direction of medievalism will be firmly deflected and brought into close harmony with modern life and modern needs and modern thought, and thus prepare the way for a real, true, gladsome and Godly reunion of the Christian Churches. In this reunion let us hope that even the unreformed Churches may ultimately take an honoured part when they have reformed themselves and been brought into alliance with the free and glorious gospel of the Blessed God as revealed and taught by Christ and His first Apostles.

