

## THE CHURCH OF IRELAND TO-DAY.

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FIFTY years ago the affairs of the Church of Ireland were far better known to the average Englishman than they are to-day. It was natural that this should be so. Disestablishment had then taken place but a brief five years previously. The two Churches had been before united, and English Churchmen, whatever had been their private views about Mr. Gladstone's Bill, naturally felt a greater interest in the early circumstances of the disestablished Church than they do now after the lapse of half a century. Two new generations have since arisen, and, though in Ireland something is still occasionally heard of what happened in the "seventies," there are few in England, outside the ranks of historians, who know anything at all about the movement of Irish Church affairs at that critical time.

The object of this paper is not to supply such information. Into the question of the rights and wrongs of disestablishment I will not enter ; neither will I tell of the discussions, often of great interest, which took place in the early synods about the revision of the Prayer Book ; nor will I speak of the labours of the body of experts who made the financial position of the disestablished Church as secure as they could. My object is with the present rather than with the past ; it is to say something of the results, as they are seen to-day, of these labours and deliberations. It may be best first to describe the organization of the Church and then to endeavour to give some idea of the existing conditions within it. It is impossible to mention everything. Many things which I might otherwise have discussed I have omitted because they have recently been said, far better than I could hope to do, by the Provost of Trinity College in a recent article in the *Review of the Churches* (January, 1924).

A line, not a very straight one, reaching from the north of the County Dublin to Galway divides the Island into its two ecclesiastical provinces of Armagh in the north and Dublin in the south. At the time of disestablishment the number of dioceses in each pro-

vince was six.<sup>1</sup> At present there are seven in the northern province, owing to the separation of Clogher from Armagh in 1886. The number in the southern province is still six. Many of these dioceses, all in fact except Armagh, Clogher and Meath, are formed by a union of original dioceses, and therefore the bishop may have two or more synods, with their accompanying organizations, within his jurisdiction. An example may make this clearer. The title of the diocese of the Bishop of Ossory is Ossory, Ferns and Leighlin. There are, or were at any rate, three Synods doing their ordinary business separately and only meeting in one on extraordinary occasions as for the election of a bishop.

Each Diocesan Synod consists, besides the bishop, of all the clergy licensed in the diocese and of a number of laymen (elected triennially) equal to twice the number of clerical members. In addition to the routine work of these synods their two most important functions are the election of the bishop when the see becomes vacant and the triennial election of its representatives to the General Synod. In the case of the General Synod the same rule works of having two laymen for each clerical member. The number of representatives for each diocese varies according to its size, but, if a diocese has ten clerical representatives, the number of lay representatives is twenty. In each Diocesan Synod the clerical and lay representatives to the General Synod are elected by the members of their own order.

The rules for the election of a bishop are complicated and difficult to explain briefly. On the vacancy of a see the Diocesan Synod is summoned and each member votes for one or more eligible persons (not exceeding three). "No person," the statute adds, "shall be entitled to vote for himself!" After this voting a list is made out of all those who have obtained, either one fourth of the total votes, or one third of the votes of either order. When the Select List has thus been prepared, each member of the Synod proceeds to vote for one of the names found on it. If, after the counting of these votes, any person is found to have obtained a clear two-thirds of the votes of both orders, he is declared elected. If no one has obtained so large a majority, the Synod by resolution may, and often does, leave the appointment to the Bench of Bishops, or if this be not done the

<sup>1</sup> It may be of interest to record the fact that the number of dioceses in the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland is far larger (28) and that that Church still retains the old provinces of Tuam and Cashel.

appointment will fall by lapse to the Bench after three months.

An additional complication in the matter of election occurs in the case of the see of Armagh. The Archbishop being the Primate of all Ireland, it is not considered just that he should be appointed by one diocese only. Accordingly, though the Armagh Synod elects a bishop, the person elected does not necessarily become Archbishop of Armagh. He becomes merely a member of the House of Bishops who then meet to elect a primate from their number. The man elected by Armagh, unless he be elected Primate, goes to the diocese vacated by the Primate chosen.

Besides its synod each diocese has its own diocesan council to manage its finance, its own diocesan court, its own boards of education and of missions and so forth.

In a similar way the whole Church is governed by the General Synod, which meets once a year and whose authority is supreme. No change can be made in the constitution or laws of the Church without its sanction. The executive council which directs the financial affairs of the Church is the Representative Church Body which meets monthly and consists of the Bishops, of members chosen by the various dioceses and of a certain number of co-opted members.

In the parochial organization the widest body is the General Vestry. In this may be enrolled not only all the qualified parishioners of either sex, but also any accustomed attendants at the parish church and any who are holders of property in the parish. This General Vestry meets, as a rule, but once a year to elect the people's churchwarden and the Select Vestry for the ensuing year. The last-named body is the real working force in the parish and consists of the clergy, the churchwardens and not more than twelve other elected members. Every three years the meeting of the General Vestry assumes a higher degree of importance, for at these intervals it elects not only the annual officers already mentioned, but also the synodsmen to represent the parish in the Diocesan Synod and the parochial nominators.

The mention of these parochial nominators suggests a word on the method of appointment to parishes. The appointment of nearly all the incumbents in the Church of Ireland is made by a Board of Nomination. Private patronage and Trustee Churches are almost entirely unknown. The board consists of seven members, the bishop of the diocese, three diocesan nominators (two clerical and

one lay), to represent the interests of the diocese, and three parochial nominators (all lay) to represent the parish. This system of appointment works well as a rule. It is not perfect, but it at least prevents a man being thrust into a parish by the bishop or a private patron, in complete disregard of the wishes of the parishioners to whom he is to minister. It will be noticed that, apart from the bishop, these boards are composed of six members, two clerical and four lay, the same relative proportion as in the synods. It was feared by some that this preponderance of the lay element might be a source of weakness. It has not proved so in practice. If it has done nothing else, it has at least given the laity a far greater share in and responsibility for the work of the Church in diocese and parish than they have in England.

The Church of Ireland is, it must be remembered, a small church, though it is, even still, the largest of all the Protestant Churches in Ireland. Only in Ulster do the Presbyterians outnumber the members of the Church of Ireland. In the West and South especially, but even elsewhere, the number of Churchmen is in many districts rapidly diminishing. Recently I met a friend from no very remote part of the Midlands. Possibly he is a pessimist, but his prediction was that there would be no Church families in his parish after fifty years. The young men are emigrating, or at any rate leaving the parish, the girls are marrying into Roman Catholic families. In Ireland one knows what that means. One result of this diminution in numbers has been the amalgamation of parishes. This has proved a good thing in some ways, as it provides the clergy with more work to do, and also, in many cases, with a larger income. It has, however, its disadvantages. The distances to be covered for services and for pastoral work of every kind, are often very great. A motor-car is essential, and even the increased income does not always readily allow of this. Another disadvantage is that a change in the hour of service in one or both of the amalgamated parishes is often necessary. This may be, and is, a cause of jealousy between the parishes, as both wish to retain the old hour of divine service. This may seem in the abstract a very small matter, but when translated into concrete experience in a remote country place, it does not seem small to those concerned. Tact, good-will and lapse of time will, however, go a long way towards obviating this difficulty. Irish Churchmen, particularly in the country parts, are,

as a rule, regular churchgoers. Even in the towns the congregations are good as compared with England. In Dublin, for example, the congregations are as large or larger than in London, while in most of the Dublin parishes the churchpeople do not number as many hundreds as there are thousands in a London parish.

The type of service found in the average church in Ireland, even in Dublin, not to speak of the country, must seem to the English very "low." This is in part due to the fact that the Irish Church was disestablished, its Prayer Book revised, and its canons drawn up at a time when the "ritualistic" controversy was newer than it is now, and when the ordinary churchgoer was more frightened by petty changes and novelties than he (or she) would be now in 1925. Also, it must not be forgotten that the presence of Romanism everywhere in Ireland, and the fact that it was generally in the ascendancy numerically, had then, and has still, a considerable effect on the opinions of the average Irish Churchman.

The Irish Prayer Book, first published in 1877, remained in all essentials as it was before disestablishment, though a vigorous attempt was made to make it more "protestant." But if the Prayer Book remained essentially unaltered, the new canons were so drawn up as to prevent many of the usages which were then gaining ground in England. Vestments are forbidden by the fourth canon. The next canon forbids Eastward Position, any use of the sign of the Cross (except in Baptism) and any bowing or other obeisance to the Lord's Table. Canon 35 lays down that there shall not be any lighted lamps or candles on the Communion Table or in any other part of the Church . . . except when they are necessary for the purpose of giving light ; and the next forbids " any cross, ornamental or otherwise, on the Communion Table or on the covering thereof . . . or on the wall or other structure behind the Communion Table." Other canons forbid the mixed Chalice and the use of " incense or any substitution therefore, or imitation thereof."

All the canons have been, for the most part, loyally observed and obeyed, however much some may have desired the removal or alteration of one or other of them. Perhaps the concluding words of the Preface to the Irish Prayer Book may not have been without effect, and the belief may have gained ground " that what is imperfect with peace is often better than what is otherwise more excellent without it." With canons such as these just mentioned in force it

is but natural that English visitors often feel themselves in a different atmosphere when they are present at Divine Service in one of our parish churches or even in one of our cathedrals. They go home and write a letter perhaps to the *Church Times* about it, quite forgetting, or being altogether ignorant of, the fact that the worshippers in the service which they despised were doctrinally just as strong churchmen and in fact as truly catholic as the objectors.

The Irish Prayer Book has been recently revised, or rather enriched. A tentative edition was, it would seem somewhat unnecessarily, issued in 1921. This has been in use in many churches. Since 1921 there has been further discussion, and within the last few weeks a pamphlet has been published containing the alterations authorized by the General Synod. The chief changes are better expressed by the word "enrich." There has been some revision in minor matters, such as change of wording, "clergy" for "curates," "all who are set over me" for "my betters," "fitting" for "convenient," and so on. We have lost an old friend by the exclusion of "N. or M." from the Catechism. There are also a few points in which definite authorization is given to practices which have been more or less accepted by custom already. As instances may be mentioned, the shortening of the Exhortation at the beginning of Morning and Evening Prayer and the abridgment of the *Benedicite* by using the refrain after a group of verses. Permission is also given for a change in the Sunday use of the Psalter. A selection of Psalms has been made for all the Sundays in the year, and the choice is left, except on great Festivals, between these and the Psalms as formerly arranged according to the days of the month.

Perhaps the most important enrichment is in the way of new Occasional Prayers and Thanksgivings. Here we have nearly thirty new Prayers *for Industrial Peace, at the time of a Parliamentary or Civic Election, For Absent Friends, For a blessing on Local Industries, For the right use of the Lord's Day*. These titles are merely a choice out of many, but they will suffice to show the variety of the enrichment.

This will not be a Book for optional use, as some of the proposed revisions in England were to have been. It will be used by all. One, at least, of the bishops has already written to his clergy directing them to make themselves familiar with the changes. This will be done. Obedience is not generally regarded as a distinguishing

feature of the Irish character. It may not be amiss, therefore, to quote a paragraph from the article above mentioned by the Provost of Trinity College :

“ I suppose that in no part of the Anglican Communion have the bishops more real authority than in the Church of Ireland. Such a spectacle as that of clergy flouting the directions or ignoring the wishes of their diocesan is hardly ever to be seen. A few cranky men, constitutionally unable to endure authority, may be found here and there ; but they are very few, and they get no support or encouragement from their brethren. . . . The Church of Ireland has often been described as ‘ Puritan ’ in its outlook, and this may be so ; but it is at any rate a remarkable note of ‘ Catholicity ’ that the bishop’s counsels are treated with respect not less than that which they are accorded in any part of the Anglican Communion, and much greater than is observable in some of its parts.”

Some bishops even in England may be tempted to say, *O si sic omnes.*

The Church of Ireland, as I have already said, is a small Church. Englishmen seldom realize how small it is. In 1911 the Church population was only 575,000, that is, about 13 per cent of the total population. In at least five dioceses the Church population numbers under 10,000, a number which in England suggests the parish rather than the diocese. It must be remembered also that almost half of the total Church population is contained within the one diocese of Down. In both the North and the South Irish Churchmen are therefore in the minority, in the former case as compared with the Roman Catholics, in the latter in comparison with the Presbyterians.

But, if small, the Church of Ireland is a united Church. The disquiet of the times immediately succeeding disestablishment has long ago vanished. The Church has in her synods made her own laws, and her sons, with a few exceptions here and there, are ready and willing to abide by them. One great unifying force, so far at least as the clergy are concerned, is the fact that with hardly an exception they have all been trained in the same Divinity School of Trinity College, Dublin. Of that great school there has been distrust at times amongst some of the laity, but never, so far as I know, amongst the clergy. They regard it as loyal to the Church, and they themselves are content to teach and abide by what they learned there. North and south of the Boyne the message of the Irish clergy has been the same. This union between the North and the South in ecclesiastical matters—and not in the Church of Ireland alone—may have important consequences in the future. Politically

North and South are now separated, but no Irish Churchman, whatever be his political views, wishes to see his Church divided.

Irish Churchmen have also shown themselves generous in their support of their Church in the past. The Church population is now only five-sixths of what it was fifty years ago. Still in spite of the decrease in numbers the subscriptions to the Sustentation Fund have not fallen off. By the end of the present year these contributions will have amounted since 1870 to very nearly £10,000,000. The average each year has not been far short of £200,000. Nor has their liberality been confined to home work. Five times as much is now contributed every year for missionary work abroad as was given in 1870.

I will conclude by saying that, if these somewhat scattered remarks on the Church of Ireland have kindled in anyone a desire to learn more about it, he will find much of interest in a book which the present Bishop of Killaloe (Dr. Patton) published a couple of years ago, and which bears the title, "Fifty Years of Disestablishment."

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The Rev. H. Elvet Lewis, M.A., is the author of the Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah in the R.T.S. well-known Devotional Commentary Series, edited by the Rev. C. H. Irwin, D.D. (3s. 6d. net). It admirably fulfils the purpose of the series. Each section is fully explained with pointed illustrations drawn from life and literature, and a helpful "Application" and "Supplication" are added to give practical value to the truths emphasized.

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