

What shall we do with our Clergy?

BY E. K. L. QUINE

WHEN things are going well it is a common enough experience to find people attacking the government. In the Church of England, on the whole, we do not attack personalities for bad or inadequate leadership, but we do attack the system. When we are passing through one of these phases, and we are passing through such a phase at the moment, it is vital for the majority to preserve a balanced judgement. Few systems are not in need of constant reform and it would be foolish to think that our present system of paying and deploying the clergy could not be improved. On the other hand we would do well to remember that it is far easier to engage in radical reforms of organisation often than to tackle the real problem of the moment.

The task of the Church in the twentieth century is increasingly difficult and we are all concerned about the urgent need to discover in the modern situation how to win people to God for we know how vital it is for them to know and love Him. The motion which led to the setting up of the Morley Commission on the Pay and Deployment of the Clergy was introduced by a speaker who said that the present system, inherited from the past, was a positive hindrance to the Church in carrying out its task in the twentieth century. We have to weigh very carefully if what he said is true and also, if what the Morley Commission has proposed will make the task of the Church any easier or more successful. We will go on facts and clear thinking and will not fall into the trap of offering sneer for sneer. A number of people, some of them reformers at heart, of whom I count myself one, are unwilling to dispense with what seems good in the present system as if it does not exist, even if it means standing the jibe that our only concern is to bolster up the status quo. If our frustration with the present slow progress of the Church led us to rush away without thinking after everyone who shouted 'Tally Ho;' many of us feel we would be doing the whole Church a disservice.

On page five of the Morley Commission's Report, the Commission paid tribute to the present way of paying and deploying the clergy, saying that the system had done a great deal in the past to build up a proper sense of pride in profession, but that despite the fact that it still retained certain values (not mentioned in detail), it was now wasteful and inadequate. Its answer to this waste and inadequacy and to the frustration of the clergy was to propose a new structure.

The Commission proposes the setting up of a Central Ministry Commission, to keep under constant review the different forms of ministry, to determine the number of clergy needed in those various categories, and to decide how many of them are needed in the various dioceses and to ensure the mobility of these clergy 'to that degree which it thinks necessary'. This Commission would also make the

appointment of bishops, deans, provosts and some canons. It would advise secular bodies employing clergy and maintain a register of all clergy and another of vacancies to be filled. It would also be responsible for those clergy who for some reason had no diocesan affiliation. The Commission proposes that in each diocese there shall be a Diocesan Ministry Commission which would appoint all clergy except those mentioned above. This body would consist of the diocesan bishop, the suffragan bishops, archdeacons, and clergy and laity appointed by the Diocesan synod so as to give adequate representation to each archdeaconry, plus nominations from the community at large. It should not exceed twenty five members. The Commission should hold all the patronage in the diocese. Clergy would derive their status not from the holding of a particular office but from 'being on the strength' or 'being on the books' of a diocese. The Commission recommends the setting up a smaller unit of pastoral care under suffragan/archdeacons and the appointment of 'rectors' who would train young clergy and head groups or teams of parochial clergy who would be known as vicars. Appointment of clergy might be for a term of years renewable by consent or without any term being specified. A Provincial Board of Referees would settle any disputes between these bodies and the clergy concerned, or between the bodies themselves. The Parson's Freehold must be removed. The Commission also dealt with the pay of the clergy although even from its own point of view, far less successfully than it had done with re-deployment. Deploring the lack of uniformity of payment which it felt would be a handicap to moving clergy about, the Commission recommends the setting up of a Central Payment Authority which would be the Church Commissioners and the pooling of all endowment income and glebe in its hand. It suggested that all clergy houses should be owned by diocese and that all clergy should receive adequate expenses of office. On the matter of differentials the Commission was divided and left the issue to the new Payment Authority.

We must now return to the question 'Will the Morley Commission's proposals make the task of the Church in this modern age any easier or more successful?' I am not alone in believing they will not. They do not begin to touch the problem of how to win people to know and love God. We must then ask 'Nevertheless would the proposals give us better machinery in any eventuality?' In order to decide this the proposals must be criticised.

The first criticism which must be levelled is that what is proposed will seriously weaken the Pastoral Authority of the bishop. Much of what was his responsibility would become the responsibility of the Diocesan Ministry Commission. Those who know how many problems involved in the running of a diocese require discreet and confidential personal care by the bishop will also know that no committee could hope to tackle these problems in the same way. The Commission's proposals would produce a subtle change in the function and character of our bishops. If this is what we want it ought only to happen after full and proper debate in the right place, not incidentally through legislation about clergy deployment. The Commission's proposals would also alter the relationship between the clergy and their bishop.

Clergy would in many respects look more to committees than to their diocesan.

The second criticism deals with the sweeping away of the Parson's Freehold. In the past, in our country, the Parson's Freehold has been the bulwark against the *wrong* kind of pressure on our clergy, by bishops and dignitaries and influential laity some of whom would be acting as patrons. It is rare that the Freehold has been abused, even the members of the Commission admit this. Often the parson may have used his limited freehold to protect the rights of his parishioners. No system of man is perfect and if the price of the benefits of the freehold, this traditional freedom of our clergy which has done so much to mould the character of the English clergyman of the Church of England, has been an occasional upset, it is a price we ought not to begrudge paying. The Commission suggests quite untruly that nothing like the freehold is found necessary elsewhere in the Anglican Communion. All over that Communion something approaching it is to be found in that the parson can only be removed after action by an appropriate court for misconduct. Do we want our clergy to lose this freedom to theorists who prefer them to be servants of a bureaucratic system?

Thirdly, the suggestion that patronage is generally mismanaged is simply not true. Such anomalies as exist, the one or two entertaining stories that speakers employ in debate, are few in number. On the whole the system works well and preserves the varied pattern of churchmanship for which the Church of England is famous. It is hard to believe, knowing how committees function that this variety could be upheld so well by a Diocesan Ministry Commission.

The fourth criticism concerns emoluments. In the past people left money for specific purposes. One of these has been the maintenance of the ministry in a given local situation. If we take money or property producing rent and divert its use for a purpose for which it was not left, who then will trust us anymore? Quite apart from this. It is a fallacy to think that if you pool the endowments of the parishes that the result will be an all round substantial increase in clergy stipends. There is just not enough money involved for this. The result would be to downgrade certain stipends which some would not consider overlarge by modern standards and make little alteration in the others which are less up to those standards. The Commission simply has no idea of how to raise the money required to make all stipends realistic today. Similarly it seems to have no idea of the vast sum needed to acquire legal ownership of all clergy houses. Think of the sum involved to buy curates' houses from the various parishes.

A final criticism (although there are others) is that the cost of putting the Commission's proposals into action has been variously estimated between a quarter of a million pounds and nearer a million. Whatever the truth is, it will cost a very large sum to begin the scheme and then to maintain it. Can we afford it at this time when parishes are being hard put to raise the ever increasing quotas?

At the beginning I wrote of the constant need for reformation in legislation. The work of the Morley Commission can at any rate lead to some reforms with profit, but not those in its proposals which would alter the whole character of the English clergy.

Two bottle necks exist in the structure of clergy appointments. The first, due to the modern trend for pluralization results in young clergy being appointed often to unsuitable first benefices because there are not suitable livings for them. The second comes (at the moment) at about the age of fifty for the able clergyman and cannot be dealt with merely by calling him 'rector'. A study needs to be done on this vital question. I believe that until it is done the numbers of ordinands will remain low.

The Commission's suggestion about suffragan/archdeacons with smaller units of pastoral care sounds well enough. I prefer the idea of a suffragan solely concerned with the pastoral care of all the clergy in a diocese and directly responsible to the diocesan whose charge this should remain. The right man could make a tremendous contribution to the well being and efficiency of the clergy and would be chosen for this purpose. The Commission's suggestion would result in too many men who are archdeacons automatically becoming suffragans, and whilst some would make good suffragans, many I think would not.

I would then suggest a meeting of the diocesan bishops to hammer out more flexible ways of clergy moving between diocese and diocese. Clergy ought to be free to write to bishops other than their diocesan about appointments and indeed to apply for vacant posts without the stigma now attached to those who openly seek a change. Vacancies in all areas should be available to all bishops and clergy.

As the Parson's Freehold has been further modified by the Pastoral Measure my suggestion is that it be left without further modification except that some machinery should be devised to enable a sincere clergyman who has found himself to be misplaced and therefore an irritation to most of his people to move without any reflection on his ability.

The Parochial Church Council ought to be able to suggest names to the patron if it felt inclined to do so and there should always be a meeting between its representatives, the patron and the diocesan bishop before an appointment is made.

There should be a national policy on curate's stipends and on expenses of the parson's office and ministry and realistic attempts to bring all diocesan minimum stipends into line whilst awaiting further improvement. It must be realised however that this can only be done by new giving.

Agreement should be reached about a retirement age for all dignitaries and clergy which could be extended by mutual agreement.

These then are some of the ways in which we could make substantial reforms in this area without taking irretrievable steps which we may later regret. The path of wisdom I think dictates such a course and I very much hope that in time it will be along these lines that we shall proceed.