

THE STATED MINISTRY OF THE
CHURCH AND HER SERVICES AS
MEANS OF SPIRITUAL BLESSING.

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AT THE CHURCH OF IRELAND CONFERENCE,
SEPTEMBER, 1894.

I shall not be doing violence to our subject if I venture to change the title, or the order of words in the title, very slightly. I would read—"The Church through her Stated Ministry and her Services, the means of Spiritual Blessing." The change will place the ministry and the services in the subordinate position, which is properly theirs, and will lead us to think of the Church herself as the channel through which the blessings flow.

The Church is the body of Christ, endowed with His life: because He lives, she lives also. She is His body: her structure is due to him as well as her life. She is filty framed and knit together by him. God tempered the body together; God had set the members, every one of them, in the body; the place of each is not self-chosen, but assigned by God. The frame-work and the life are both alike from Him.

And as the body is one, so the life is one. It is not the aggregate—not the sum total of lives of members. The natural body does not live because the eyes, ears, hands, feet are alive; they are alive because it lives. The life in them is nothing less than the one body-life. Neither does any part receive life direct from the head, but through the joints of supply according to its place in the body. So the spiritual life of the individual is not an independent life, nor is it a life given to him immediately by the spiritual head, Christ. It is a sharing in the body-life. And as with life, so with all that life involves: all comes indeed from Christ, but comes by means of the organ which He constructed for this very purpose—Christ the primal source, His Church the channel of the life and the spiritual blessings which each member enjoys. There is no religion of individualism, and there is no 'coterie' religion in Holy Scripture.

But now, let us distinguish. Life is one and the same in all: but action varies from one to another. Life is the same in eye and ear, but the eye sees, the ear hears: life one in the whole body, but by the eye the whole body enjoys the blessing of sight, by the ear the blessing of hearing: each blessing through one organ, its own proper organ, and through that only. And this, because He who tempered the body together, constructed and set the eye and the ear to stated ministers of sight and of hearing to all. You will see that in the natural body there are certain members which occupy a position, that is, which perform certain functions for the good of the body generally; and the duty which each has to discharge cannot be fulfilled by any other. So also in the spiritual body; when God tempered it together, He constructed and set certain members on whom He imposed, and to whom He entrusted, public duties, the qualifications for which are peculiar and proper to themselves, but which are to be fulfilled for the body at large. "The Stated Ministry" was of His structure and is His gift. S. Paul puts it very emphatically:—"He Himself gave the apostles, and the prophets, and the evangelists, and the pastors and the teachers." And in another epistle he insists that the ministerial power is not lodged in any but the ministry. "Are all apostles?" he asks; "are all prophets? are all teachers?" Surely not. It is not more true that no other organ than the eye can see, no other organ than the ear hear, than that no other than the bishop can do what belongs to the bishop, no other

than the priest the functions of a priest, no other than a deacon the things of a deacon.

But what are these ministerial functions or for what purpose are they bestowed? First of all, we answer, in the words of our present subject, they are for the conveyance of "Spiritual Blessing," as S. Paul teaches us. He gave them for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ till we all (the whole of us) attain unto the measure of His fulness, till the Church be the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.

But the question will repay a closer answering. Some persons are afraid either to ask or answer it, because these exclusive privileges and functions of the clergy seem to them to point to a priestly caste and to a dangerous sacerdotalism. Of course, our fears must not make us shrink from accepting what Holy Scripture teaches, but it ought not be difficult to relieve its teaching from such misrepresentation. We have but to recall what has been said. Ministers are members of the body; they are sharers in a common life. By that life they live as all the members live. If they are ministers why every member has some ministry of love and blessing to fulfil. If they are public ministers, public officers, they are so, not only for the Church, but of the Church. It is the Church herself, corporately, who acts through them. It is not the eye, apart from the body, that sees, nor the ear that hears, but the man.

"Mind, it seeth; mind it heareth,
All the rest is deaf and blind."

It is not the bishop apart, nor the priest apart, who blesseth; nor the deacon who ministereth, but the whole Church in the bishop, in the priest, in the deacon, and Christ in the Church. There is in very truth a specific grace of orders; the words of ordination, with the laying on of hands, are effective words, not precariously invoking, but certainly conveying specific grace and power, since they are ultimately spoken by Christ Himself, who is the giver of all good gifts, and whose divine providence has appointed these diverse orders in His Church; but the gifts do not set up a separate priestly caste. The priesthood, as we know, resides in the whole corporate body, the Church, and this of necessity, because the Church is the mystical body of the Great High Priest. To the Church the Lord entrusted the treasures of "spiritual blessing," and in the stated ministry He furnished the Church with the organs by which the blessings are conveyed.

The subjects committee have done well in adding the "services" to the "stated ministry" as the means of "spiritual blessing." What is in our mind when we speak of spiritual blessing? A blessing straight from Christ Himself, entering into the very soul and spirit, quickening, enriching us. And, perhaps, a blessing which shall exactly meet our needs in the several epochs and in the manifold and varied experiences of life. Are such blessings to be found in our Prayer-books? "I am with you always" is Christ's most sure promise to His Church. If Christ be with us the spiritual grace must accompany the prayer which invokes it, the action which expresses it. If to any man the Church services are "mere forms," "cold forms, void of spiritual blessing," it is his own fault his own grievous sin. Christ is in them; has his part in them as we have ours; and He, for His part, will, and does, most surely, make good the spiritual blessing to every willing soul. The services have no other than a spiritual significance. Christ by His spirit is active in them, every one. Christ is with us at the font, and in and through our service conveys the blessing of the new and spiritual life. With us in confirmation, giving the sevenfold strength of the Spirit to His young soldier and servant; not the hand of the bishop alone, but the fatherly hand of God resting upon the head. With us in holy

communion, breaking, giving spiritually the very body, the very blood which is the food and the life of man; and accepting that sacrifice of ourselves, our souls and bodies, which we are permitted to make in the sacrifice which He once for all made for us upon the cross. Upon this great Liturgy, this Divine Service, I must dwell, for here truly blessings are plentiful and rife. Think of it in its origin—the fellowship with the apostles in the breaking of the bread and the prayers, the prayers which ever since have been the sacred treasure of the Church, and which to-day she offers throughout the whole world; which she offers, not indeed repeating but pleading the sacrifice which the Lamb of God is now presenting before the throne of His Father. Lift up your eyes to the heavenly temple, to the angel with the golden censer, and the much incense which he offers with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar. Realise this great prayer meeting, this one unceasing voice ascending in the way, and in the words of God's appointing. Where is there its like? Has it no prevalence? Do no angels of blessing descend to us upon the Son of man? Consider the contents. Reflect upon the opening of the canon, the prayer for the Church Militant. Who is forgotten in it? It is the whole Church praying for the whole Church, and for every particular member of the same. It is every member praying for the whole Church, and for every brother and sister in it. The Liturgic prayer is not, indeed, to be lightly or carelessly said, but to be reverently offered; and it would be well if worshippers were encouraged to send in beforehand requests for intercessions of thanksgivings, not alone with reference to sickness and recovery, but to all our needs, and to the blessings which comfort and strengthen in every time of need. Had I time I would ask you to apply the same considerations to our daily prayers and Litany, and our conviction would still be—"No other prayers are equal to the prayers of our Mother the Church." Suffer a brief word concerning the occasional offices. We solemnize matrimony; Christ is with us conferring spiritual benediction and grace, joining man and wife together as we clasp their hands. We visit the sick; Christ is with us giving the great spiritual blessing, the full assurance of the forgiveness of sins, the absolution which we by His authority minister. We lay the body, which was the temple of the Holy Ghost, to rest in the acre of God, Christ is with us by the grave—"I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in me shall never die."

Do you ask any longer—Is the Church in her stated ministry and services the means of spiritual blessing?

But you will charge me with idealising. Not so; Christ's ideal is real. If to any of us it is still only what might be, not what is, the fault is not with Him. After all we confess it might be. Why is it not? Because of our unfaith. That is the reason why many seek the spiritual blessing outside the Church, in the private prayer meeting, in the undenominational assembly, where distinctive Church doctrine has to be suppressed—*suppressio veri*. Had we faith, we should perceive that it is in His Church Christ is to be found in fulness of spiritual power. Had we faith we should seek Him there. And what a difference this would make. What a difference it is making, for faith is reviving. The fabrics of our Churches are being more reverently cared for. These we testify are no other than houses of God, gates of heaven. They are more often than a while since houses of daily prayer, and even of private prayer. On Sundays they are more than preaching houses, though I, for one, will never disparage the pulpit. Why should it be disparaged? The reverend demeanour, the very attitude of the congregation, signifies a growing sense of the spiritual presence of the Saviour. The great prayer meeting of heaven and earth in the Liturgy is now a frequent observance, and