

Miscellaneous.

RITUALISM.

We take the following extracts on the subject of Ritualism, from the Bishop of Oxford's Charge, delivered at the recent visitation of his Diocese:—

All religious Ritual, which is not used in conformity with the direct command of God, must of course be adopted for the end of assisting His people to set forth His glory.

There can, therefore, be no absolutely fixed standard to which all Public Christian worship should rigidly conform. It must, to a certain extent, vary according to the knowledge, the customs, and the temper of the country and age in which it is practised. This I notice first, because the necessity of such power of variation may, I think, lead us on to see what are the great fundamental rules by which its whole scheme ought to be framed. For all Ritual, to fulfil its purpose, must lead the worshipper to God, not interpose itself as a veil between God and him; it must express whilst it may elevate his devotion. Whatever fails in this, fails of effecting its true purpose. For if it does not express the inward worship of the heart, it must be either an hypocrisy or an oppression, and in either case it must mar and not raise devotion. It may thus fail if by its unaccustomedness, its splendour, its variety, or its intricacy, it draws the soul, which should be lifted up to God, down to the images which float as upon an intervening mist upon its own presence and action.

If these principles are sound, it follows—first, that whilst Ritual may rise with, and in its turn help to raise increasing devotion, such use must be most gradual, that it may be free from the starts and shocks which must accompany the sudden acting of external power on any living body and be able to adapt itself freely to the unseen growth of the inward and spiritual devotion of the souls whose outward worship it is to embody and express; next, that all sudden changes of the externals of worship, which, in violation of this harmony, rush greatly beyond the inner life of the worshipper's devotion, are likely to injure the character of his worship; and thirdly, that, irrespective of any such shocks, a greatly raised Ritual may not necessarily be in itself a blessing; for that it may be approaching the condition in which the intricate and artificial character of its symbolism, or even its very beauty and gorgeousness unfits it for being a transmitting medium for the soul's worship. As to the application of the two first of these limitations, whilst we must always guard against weakly yielding to the love of pre-eminence which still leads many a parish Diotrophes to seek to dictate rudely to those who are set over him in the Lord, yet there ought to be a loving, tender watchfulness on the part of those who desire any change, whether clergy or laity, lest what they deem an improvement should become a stumbling-block to another. Still more care is needful as to the third limitation. For as we have in all the details of worship no divinely-appointed ceremonial, we must watch jealously in all changes whether or not we have with us indications of the leading hand of God, and at once suspect as earthly additions whatever seems to lack such discoverable tokens of the Divine approval. And now, when I proceed to try by these principles the extreme Ritualism of which I speak, I have no hesitation in avowing that it does not appear to me to make good its claim to our adoption. Its growth has been sudden—not to say excessive. For, first, the sudden restoration of