

The Church Guardian

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Special Notice.

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CALENDAR FOR FEBRUARY.

- FEB. 2nd—Purification of V.M.
 " 6th—Septuagesima.
 " 13th—Sexagesima.
 " 20th—Quinquagesima. — (*Notice of Ash Wednesday and of St. Matthias.*)
 " 23rd—ASH WEDNESDAY. (P. Ps. M., 6, 32, 38; E. 102, 130, 143.—Commination Service.
 " 24th—ST. MATTHEW, A. & M., Athanasian Creed.
 27th—1st Sunday in Lent.—(*Notice of Ember Days.*)

LAY CO-OPERATION.

"As the body is one and hath many members, and all the members of the body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular."—1 Cor. xii, 12-27.

We have here that well known characteristic illustration of St. Paul, which occurs so often in his epistles, yet which is never used in the Gospels, wherein he tells us that the Church is the mystical Body of Christ; a Body, of which Christ is the Living Soul Who inspires it with life, the Master Mind Who thinks and directs how the various members shall act; and as in the one body there are many members, but all the members have not the same office, so, St. Paul tells us, is it with the Church. Each member has its own particular work assigned to it by Christ. There are diversities of gifts, there are differences of administrations, there are diversities of operations, but through all it is one and the self-same God, dividing to every man severally as He will, and setting some in the Church to be apostles, others prophets, others teachers, then miracles, gifts of healing, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.

Here then we have the full thought of St. Paul; it is (to use his own language) that "we are laborers with God." And the more we strive to enter into and realise its meaning—making his high ideal our own, the more we discover how true it is, how satisfying it is, and how inspiring a conception it gives us of our own life-work and duty.

It is one of the chief things we have to be thankful for in this nineteenth century that the Church of Christ is beginning to awaken to this high conception of her work. As the universality of Christ's Kingdom becomes more and more a ruling thought, we behold a corresponding change in men's appreciation of their Christian responsibilities. The days are passing away in which there was that strong line of demarcation between the clergy and laity, when the latter looked upon the Church as the peculiar body of the former,

throwing the whole burden of the Church's work upon the ministers of Christ, and standing aloof from it as a matter in which they had no interest, care or responsibility. The day is fast approaching, at least in England and America, when devout laymen are finding that they have also their part to bear in the spread of God's Kingdom; that through lack of their active co-operation the Church has been impoverished in the past, and that they, with their peculiar gifts, practical experience of life, and personal influence over men, are capable of wonderfully enriching the Church of the future; while the clergy, on the other hand, are discovering that lay co-operation is a great but hitherto almost unexplored mine of spiritual wealth.

Exactly how and in what ways this wealth of Christian effort can be best utilised, we cannot adequately forecast, but thus much we know, that the pathway before us is going to be one of ceaseless discovery, that as the desire to enter into some kind of Church work develops among the laity, new opportunities for doing that work will crowd upon us thick and fast; and that, as the number of lay-workers increase, achievements will become possible which are utterly undreamed of now.

Very noteworthy are the changes that have taken place in the Church of England within the past few years. Read about the work that the laity are doing and see how the clergy are depending on their help in the Church's parochial missions, in her temperance societies, in her free reading-rooms, coffee houses and workingmen's clubs. Mark the way in which she is reaching the lowest classes through their ministrations, and through the efforts of such diocesan lay-helpers' associations as that which meets here to-night; and there you have a harbinger of what the future will be.

Thank God this is a cause in which of all the religious bodies of Christendom our own Church is most fitted to take the lead.

If she emphasizes the authority of the priesthood, and has been stigmatised as narrow and bigoted in past days for so doing, it has been only because she has realised so deeply the responsibility of the clergy as spiritual leaders. It is just because our organisation is so complete that there is not another Church or Christian denomination which makes so loud a call upon laymen to stand side by side with the clergy as laborers together with God, and affords so large a sphere of varied activities for lay co-operation.

Witness the way in which she calls upon them to bear their part in the public worship of the Church. Her service is a service of common praise and common prayer, in which the congregations are expected to officiate almost as much as the minister himself. And unless they do so, joining heartily in the responses and the singing, and thus bringing out the full intention and capacity of the Prayer Book service, that service always seems lifeless and cold.

Indeed, the difficulty in the past has not been that the Church has not made room enough for the laity, but that the laity have not arisen to the full sense of their responsibility as members of the Church. The one thing needful now for each and all to realise that the Church's work is their work; that every member of the Body of Christ has his own peculiar office—his own especial work to do for God; and that for the discharge of this duty God has committed to him a particular gift of the Spirit.

One may not at first discern what that especial work or that particular spiritual gift is, for God leaves us to find out these things for ourselves, and the only pathway to such discovery is experience. Begin to do some work for God, however small it may be; enter upon it with prayer; do it with faith; do it with your might, and you will soon find that God has a place for you to fill.

Here, then, is the first requisite—a simple, earnest willingness to do the kind of work for Christ which God has fitted us to do best.

The second requisite is humility. Hundreds are held back from Church work by pride. They fear the criticism of the world; they are ashamed to stoop down to little acts and words of love which the world despises; to be a servant of servants for Jesus' sake. They would be willing to fill a large place, where their dignity would not suffer; but they rebel against taking the lowest place. It is thus that our eyes are blinded to truth. It is humility that ennobles, and this very pride which dwarfs and belittles us. "Whoever will be chief among you," said our Lord, "let him be your servant: even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many." The most majestic scene, the sublimest sight ever witnessed in this lower world was when, on the night before the Crucifixion, the Everlasting Son of God knelt down upon the floor of the upper room and washed His disciples' feet. Brethren, the one thought that should be in our minds in all this work for God is, not what we should most like to do, or be most ashamed of doing, but how and where we can be most useful.

The next requisite is self-sacrifice. The very fact that one does God's work for Him and not for one's self, that he is to gain no selfish end by it, and that to engage in it he must give up some portion of his ease or selfish pleasure, is the reason why so few of the laity are willing to undertake it. Yet here again behold the blindness of the human heart. Nothing that is done for self outlasts its little day. Nothing is real or eternal but that which is done for duty and for God. Christ was only appealing to an eternal truth when He said: "He that findeth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for My sake and the Gospel's shall find it."

It is indeed true that the lawyer and the physician, the business man and the tradesman, and, above all, the parent, has his high vocation of God in his own calling, provided that what he does he does "in the Name" and for the sake "of the Lord Jesus." And St. Paul, you remember, reckons healing, helps and governments among the gifts of the Spirit, but it is also true that these are the men of all others, who, through their self-discipline and experience, are most needed as helpers and lay-workers in the Church. He who has the most to do is always the man who can do the most.

I know how hard it is for such men to devote an evening a week, or even in the month, to Church work, but the very sacrifice or self-denial that such an effort costs brings its own great blessing with it both upon the work and the worker.

And if such an one asks: "What can I do?" God's answer is: "Neglect not the gift that is in thee."

St. Peter said to the lame man: "Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee," and his gift was worth more to that poor cripple than all the silver and gold of the Temple itself. So it may be with us, if we stop thinking and mourning over capacities and advantages that we have not, and begin simply with what we have.

And what, think you, is the greatest of all gifts that one has to bestow? Have you ever considered, what that influence is which accomplishes most in the history and growth of the Church? It is the gift and the influence of human sympathy.

When a man says: "I am not fitted to be a Sunday-school or Bible class teacher, or a mission worker, or one who can speak even to the poorest, most ignorant wayfarer about Christ," do you not see what holds him back? He is thinking of himself, not of those who need his help. He has not the spirit of self-sacrifice. If he would only blot out that thought of self, rising above his self-consciousness, and simply