Some Chapters in the History of the Early English Church.

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VII.—The English Dioceses.

THE instructions which Gregory the Great gave to Augustine for his guidance in the establishment of Christianity in Britain seem to show that he was hardly aware of the differences between the Teutonic tribes which had settled in the island; and perhaps he was imperfectly informed as to the wide difference between these immigrants and the original inhabitants. He appears to have regarded them all as one nation. He writes to Augustine of "the English," "the Church of the English," and "the Bishops of Britain" (Bede, "H. E.," i. 27, 29; *cf.* 30). He enjoins a very simple scheme as to episcopal jurisdiction. Augustine is to ordain twelve Bishops, who are to be subject to him, with the Bishop of London as their Metropolitan, and the Metropolitan is in future to be elected by his own Synod, and to receive the pall from Rome. Augustine is also to ordain a Bishop for the city of York, who is in turn to ordain twelve Bishops to serve under him as Metropolitan, when he has received the pall from Rome. This first Bishop of York is to be subject to the authority of Augustine, to whose care all the Bishops of Britain are committed; but after the death of Augustine the Bishop of York is to be in no way subject to the Bishop of London. In other words, England is to be divided into two provinces, each governed by its Metropolitan, one at London and one at York, and each province is to have twelve episcopal sees. So long as he lives, Augustine is to be supreme, but after his death the northern province is to be entirely independent of the southern Metropolitan.

The scheme is simple and symmetrical, but it was made in ignorance of the circumstances, and it was never carried into effect. Even now, the Archbishop of York has far less than

twelve suffragans, and there has never been an Archbishop of London. The fact that there were not twenty-four territorial divisions, nor any civil divisions that could conveniently be subdivided into twenty-four, was perhaps enough to cause Gregory's scheme to fail. There were not twenty-four kingdoms, or twelve, or six, but seven to be considered. And, besides this, there was the fact that the different kingdoms had been converted to Christianity in different ways from different sources; and although the essentials of Christianity were everywhere the same, there were considerable differences of form, which might easily harden into schisms and render a uniform organization impossible. Roughly speaking, Roman missionaries had converted Kent, Essex, East Anglia, and part of Northumbria. Scottish missionaries had converted Mercia and part of Northumbria. Northumbrian missionaries had converted Wight and Sussex. And there was much confusion and difficulty until Theodore of Tarsus organized and consolidated the whole.

Meanwhile, the ecclesiastical divisions had taken a form very different from that which had been projected by Pope Gregory: local institutions proved stronger than papal injunctions. The dioceses, for the most part, followed the divisions which already existed between the different kingdoms. To such an extent was that the case, that where our knowledge is imperfect, as it often is, the limits of the one are a fairly safe guide to the limits of the other. It may happen that in some instances we know the limits of the dioceses, without being sure about the civil divisions. In such cases the limits of the ancient dioceses are a good guide to the limits of the ancient kingdoms and principalities. And this historical feature is not confined to England. In other countries also the ecclesiastical map frequently follows the civil ways, not only in its original construction, but also in its subsequent modifications.

Here the Scottish Church in Ireland and Scotland, from which some of the missionaries who converted the English came, hardly comes under consideration. Bishops there had originally no territorial jurisdiction: they were Bishops of tribes

rather than of districts, and they were little more than officials for performing certain episcopal functions, such as ordaining. It was the heads of monasteries that had jurisdiction. The head of a monastery might be a Bishop, but his being one did not increase his jurisdiction. There is, however, this much of illustration to be obtained from the Keltic Church, that when, in a later age, divisions of the nature of dioceses were formed, they were in the first instance coincident with the tribal boundaries.[1]

The ecclesiastical organization in Gaul is closely analogous to that which prevailed in England, but there we have to deal with cities rather than kingdoms. The episcopal seat was placed in the chief city belonging to the tribe, and the jurisdiction of the Bishop coincided with the jurisdiction of the city. To a considerable extent this ancient principle still holds good, or, if there has been modification, it has been of a simple kind: a large diocese has been divided, or two small ones have been united. Virtually, the principle is the same as that which originated English dioceses—viz., that ecclesiastical divisions should depend upon earlier civil divisions. And the same principle holds good in Germany also, but there it is less easy to trace it than in France, because the changes in the civil divisions have been more numerous.

It would be interesting to consider to what extent the English dioceses have been determined by the shires, the limits of which have changed very little for many centuries. But the shires themselves are of later date than the period which we are considering. The fact with which we are concerned is, that the original jurisdiction of the English sees was determined, not in accordance with the arrangement prescribed by the Pope, but by the limits of the already existing kingdoms. Each kingdom, it was thought, ought to have its Bishop with as much reason as it had its King. We have seen how quickly experience proved that one Bishop was quite inadequate to the work that had to be done, and how Theodore of Tarsus set

[1] C. Plummer, "Vitæ Sanctorum Hiberniæ," i., p. cxiii.

himself to work to break up the larger dioceses, and how, at a later day, Bede urges Egbert of York to work for an increase in the episcopate. Nevertheless, the principle that civil boundaries are to be the guide in determining episcopal jurisdiction seems to be kept in view. It is, perhaps, true to say that this principle was never formally laid down: it was possibly adopted almost as a matter of course. Boundaries were wanted for a new purpose; boundaries already existed for an old purpose, and they would serve the new purpose very well; then why think of anything different?

Theodore of Tarsus was, perhaps, the last instance of a foreigner obtaining one of the principal sees. Not till a later day does that become an abuse and a grievance. At first it was neither: it was a necessity. The infant English Church was unable to walk alone: it must for a time be guided by pastors brought from outside the nation, for there were no Englishmen capable of holding such responsible posts. But as soon as the English Church was able to walk alone, it was allowed to walk alone, and it continued to do so. After Theodore of Tarsus had done his work, the clergy of the English Church were almost always Englishmen, at least for some centuries. And it is surely a mistake to regard this fact as evidence of the weak and temporary character of the work of Augustine. If the Bishops of his succession quickly died out, we may regard that as evidence of the success of his labours. It is one of the greatest triumphs of missionary effort to be able to train up a native ministry, independent of the original source. When Central Africa has a ministry of its own, and requires no more Europeans to supply it with clergy, will that be evidence that the Universities' Mission has been a failure? Whatever estimate we may form of the results of the mission of Augustine, we must not place the rise of an independent English clergy to its discredit.

There is yet another particular in which the scheme set forth by Pope Gregory has not been fulfilled. That London has never become a Metropolitan see, and York has never had

twelve suffragans, has been already pointed out. But, besides this, the northern Metropolitan has never been wholly independent of the southern one, for York has always been in a subordinate place to Canterbury, especially in the period previous to the Norman Conquest. Only once, and for a very short time, was the dignity of Canterbury impaired and its jurisdiction very seriously curtailed; and then it was not York that gained by the temporary degradation of the see of Augustine. Offa, the vigorous and victorious King of Mercia, whose conquests had almost reduced the seven kingdoms to three—Northumbria, Mercia, and Wessex—and seemed likely to reduce them to one, had an ambitious ecclesiastical policy, which was no doubt intended to strengthen his political position. That he was regarded, even on the Continent, as a power to be reckoned with is shown by the fact that Pope Hadrian I. thought it worth while to write to Charlemagne and tell him that he did not believe the rumour that Offa wanted Charlemagne to help him to depose the Pope. Hadrian calls Offa "King of the English nation," and says that he has received ambassadors from him. And Offa evidently had influence at Rome. He seems to have thought it an unfortunate circumstance for his kingdom that neither of the Metropolitan sees lay within it. Jaenbert, or Jambert, was then Archbishop of Canterbury (767-791), and, like Offa, was a man of strong character. It was some years after the monks of Canterbury had elected him to the vacant see that Offa began his conquest of Kent, in which struggle he was opposed by the Archbishop. When Offa's success was complete, and Jaenbert had become by the law of conquest his subject, Offa determined to have a Metropolitan see in the kingdom of Mercia. The see on which he fixed was Lichfield, and he desired to make the Bishop of Lichfield a Metropolitan, with jurisdiction from the Humber to the Thames. To this scheme Pope Hadrian gave his consent. He may have thought Offa was a person whom it was worth while to gratify, or he may have acted on the principle, *Divide et impera*; two rival Metropolitans would more easily be kept under Roman

influence than one with undivided jurisdiction. And it is possible that he really thought the plan a good one on its own merits. He certainly gave it his sanction. In 786 he sent two legates to Offa, and after hearing his views, one of them, George, went on a visitation tour to York, and with Archbishop Eanbald held a council at which Alcuin was present. The other, Theophylact, visited Offa's dominions. Somewhat later both legates attended a council at Chelsea, which, for obvious reasons, is called in the Saxon Chronicle "the contentious Synod." Such seems to have been the order of events, but there are chronological and other difficulties. In spite of the strenuous opposition of Jaenbert and his supporters, sanction was given to the promotion of Lichfield to be a Metropolitan see, to which was assigned authority over seven dioceses in Mercia and East Anglia, while Canterbury was left with only five—viz., London, Winchester, Rochester, Selsey and Sherborne. Higbert, the Bishop of Lichfield, was to continue to hold the see under these new conditions, but he had to wait until he received the pall from Rome before he could assume the new title. This evidently arrived in 788, for in that year he signs one charter as Bishop and another as Archbishop; and in 789 there is again a Synod at Chelsea, which is presided over by Archbishop Jaenbert and Archbishop Higbert. Offa, in gratitude to the Pope, promised an annual tribute to Rome of 365 gold mancuses, one of which, with *Offa Rex* on it, is still in existence.[1] It has been thought that this tribute was the origin of "Peter's Pence," but that is by no means certain. It is more probable that the *Romefeoh*, or *Romescot*, did not originate before the reign of Alfred or of his son Edward, and it is in connection with Edward that the word *Romefeoh* first occurs: Bede never mentions it. When 830 Saxon silver pennies were found in Rome some thirty or more years ago, they were with high probability assumed to be a remittance of Peter's Pence. Of Alfred there were 3; of Edward, 217; of Athelstan, 393; of

[1] A silver *mancusa* was equivalent to thirty silver pence; a gold one was worth nearly ten times as much.

Edmund, 195; which gives one some idea of the time when this remittance was sent. Be this as it may, Offa's tribute to Rome did not secure the permanence of his new archbishopric. After about sixteen years (787–803) Higbert had to resign; Canterbury recovered its rights, and there never again was an Archbishop of Lichfield.

In what has been said above no account has been taken of the diocesan divisions which may have existed in Britain before the conversion of the English. It may be doubted whether there were any. What we know of the Keltic Church in Ireland and Scotland would lead us to the conclusion that the British Bishops had no dioceses in the strict sense of the term. But the signatures of the British Bishops at the Council of Arles in A.D. 314 rather point in the other direction. What is certain is that we do not know what the limits of episcopal jurisdictions, if they existed, were. The conquest by the English invaders obliterated all such divisions, and civil divisions took their place —the civil divisions which served to determine the limits of the English dioceses when they arose.

Stubbs ("Const. Hist.," chap. viii.) has pointed out what a blessing it was that the English Church was thus prevented from inheriting any traditions from Romano-British Christianity, such as those which had infected the Christian Church in France and in the Rhineland. Our insular position probably contributed to this happy result. There was nothing of Roman imperialism mixed up with our ecclesiastical organization. Bishops in England were not compelled, as they often were in France, to accept the position of civil magistrates and other secular offices, and they were rarely local potentates, as German Bishops often were. This feature in English ecclesiastical organization is illustrated by the places which were selected as episcopal sees. Sometimes, no doubt, the chief town of the kingdom was chosen, and this was specially likely to be the case at the outset, when the conversion of the King led to the conversion of his subjects. In the cases of Canterbury, London, York, Rochester, and Winchester, we have the chief

town as the seat of the Bishop. But Dunwich, Elmham, Selsey, Sherborne, Lichfield, Hereford, and Hexham were villages. So also were Crediton, Ramsbury, and Wells—the sees created by Edward the Elder. Perhaps Lindisfarne may be taken as another example; but that may have been chosen because, like its parent, Iona, it was an island, rather than because it was not a centre of population. In this way English Bishops escaped a great deal of political entanglement. They did not become Dukes or Counts, and were able to keep free from Court intrigues. This was less true of the two Metropolitans than of the rest; for the fact of their having jurisdiction in several kingdoms brought them necessarily into secular relationships with civil rulers, and sometimes into rivalry with them. First Canterbury and then York assumed the right to coin money, and the pieces bore the Metropolitan's name and likeness. In the great find of silver pennies at Rome, mentioned above, there were six of Plegmund, Archbishop of Canterbury. The promotion of Higbert to be Archbishop of Lichfield and his resignation or deprivation (both of them apparently for political reasons) are rare examples of anything of the kind. In short, by being outside political struggles and remote from Courts, they were able to do spiritual work in a more spiritual manner; and when they did act as counsellors to Princes, or intervened as peacemakers between combatants, they were able to do so without being at once suspected of being influenced by party motives. A few centuries later the influence of the world upon the Church had increased, and England had to reconcile itself to the fact that not only were its Bishops obliged to be statesmen, but that sometimes the secular office caused the spiritual office to be neglected and almost forgotten.