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THE CLERGY AND THE NEW HOUSING SCHEMES.

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IN his book *This Freedom*, Mr. Hutchinson describes the disastrous career of a poor clerical family. He describes the effect of clerical poverty upon the family, and especially, upon the character and effectiveness of the parson. But he leaves to our conjecture the wider effect upon the people dwelling within the parish. When the Vicar cries "Infernal parish! Hateful people!" it is not difficult to estimate the deadness and drabness and ineffectiveness of the spiritual life and worship of his parishioners. Yet the experience of the Vicar of Ibbotsfield, and the experience of his parishioners, are typical of the clerical and parochial life of hundreds of our town parishes. Church life is a sluggish meandering stream, possessing little movement and little power. It is unable to attract or to inspire, still less to uplift and to save. The church itself is a squalid building, meanly planned, indifferently built, ugly without and within, warmed by a defective heating apparatus, badly lighted by evil-smelling gas, seated with rows of cumbersome, uncomfortable pews. The services are sloppily conducted by a jaded, lifeless, disappointed and inefficient parson. The organ-playing is blatant, the voice work of the choir-boys always raucous and never musical. Surplices are dirty and cassocks are torn. The sermon is an insult to the intelligence of a pupil-teacher. It does not even act as a heart-warmer to the sentimentalist who likes to come away from church having been made to feel good. It is without points, incoherent, badly articulated, utterly lacking in the grace of S. John, the reasoning of S. Paul, or the thunder of the Baptist. Yet this is the kind of Church-life which we are not only struggling to perpetuate in old town parishes, but seeking to introduce into the new suburbs springing up around our big towns, as one great housing scheme after another becomes completed.

What is the process? A piece of land is begged or purchased. A tin chapel is rushed up. A young but not too well-learned parson is placed in charge. Under the temporary excitement of coming to live in a brand-new district, and in a brand-new house, a few impressionable people are persuaded to attend the brand-new tabernacle. Excitement is maintained when parochial offices are distributed among the impressionable people who have never held any sort of office in their lives before. It is a fine thing to live in a new suburb, you can be a churchwarden or a sidesman, or you may sit on the Church Council with nothing to do and much to say, and every opportunity for saying it without fear of retort.

In the meantime the young Incumbent exploits this excitement

quite successfully for a while. A grant of a few hundred pounds from diocesan or other funds becomes the nucleus of the building fund of the new church. By the aid of one or two bazaars, perhaps assisted by a free-will offering scheme, some three or four thousand pounds are collected from the people of the neighbourhood, and a church builder is allowed to commence work. But here the tide of prosperity turns. Up to this point fair progress has been made. The new population were sincerely keen to have their own new church, and for the time being the Incumbent was an enthusiastic man. To build that church was the first inspiration of both people and parson, but it also became their first temptation. Before the cost of the building had been completely subscribed or collected, a builder-man was engaged, who undertook to proceed with the work and wait for the balance. But obviously this decision entailed a modification of the Vicar's first glowing vision of the new church —the people probably never had any vision, beyond that of a building to be called a church. Economy becomes the password of the building operations, and of every Church Council meeting held after they began. The contractors, who probably never had a worthy scheme at all, are compelled to modify their badly conceived plans as they proceed. Finally a jerry-built structure with shoddy appointments is finished, and the parson and Church Council are faced with a debt of some £7,000–£10,000.

Now, if there is one thing that the average dweller in a new suburb is afraid of, it is debt. Perhaps he is in debt himself, or, if not, he is constantly on the verge of being in debt. Consequently the church which was to become for him the comforting symbol not only of his spiritual hopes, but of his material hopes of prosperity in the new suburb, ends by being the symbol of that which he most fears. What happens? The eager or curious congregation which half-filled the new church on the first few Sundays after it was opened, dwindles away. The young Vicar is always asking for money. People have already contributed as much as they can afford. New members will not join a concern which is in debt, and, there are no new offices to be distributed in order to attract them by the score with the hope of being appointed.

This is the first hard awakening which breaks the heart of the enthusiastic young Incumbent. What now of his other hopes, his vicarage, his future wife already betrothed, the commencement of parochial organisations, the engagement of an assistant curate, the thronging congregations, the throbbing spiritual life of the new parish of S——, to be run on up-to-date lines, according to the plan of the lecturer on "Pastoralia" at his theological college, and of the confessor who gave addresses at his ordination retreat? He is always mentally harking back to that period of his youth, when, a young enthusiast among other enthusiasts, he enjoyed the friendships and the culture, whether much or little, yet always real, of student-days. The more obscure the college from which he came, the more ambitious will be his hopes of the great career before him, for, if a member of a great University, he at least had

the opportunity of shedding some of his illusions at a University Settlement.

But he struggles manfully, and part of the plan materialises. The debt on the church perhaps drags on, but somehow a vicarage is put up, too big by far, and then the young wife is brought into it. Now comes the second awakening—marriage does not fulfil his hopes. He learns that it is at best a vocation, and always a discipline. In his case it is a vocation which is starved, or a discipline made hideous by the pinch of poverty, or the nightmare of debt. He now understands why many left the church, and others refused to join it so long as it was known that the parish was in debt. If he is wise he admits that those people were right. Yet no relief comes, for even if the free-will offerings and Easter offerings grow, if a couple of thousand pounds are secured, somehow, for an endowment, these benefits are neutralised by the appearance of children—one, two, three, four, five by the end of ten years of married life. Holidays are now impossible, books cannot be bought. He becomes dishevelled and down at heel. The agony of mind is increased by watching an over-worked wife become a dispirited, ailing woman, and by realising that his children are growing up with no better training and no better prospects than those of the struggling little families among whom he dwells. As the first children were born a burst of congratulation, which was really sympathy, was manifested by the parishioners. But they soon tired, and gradually it came about that the most despised man in the suburb, the most maligned, the least understood, is the gloomy, pale-faced, weak-voiced individual who occupies the pulpit of a half-empty church on Sunday, and crawls round to visit a few sick folk during the week. No wonder, that like Mr. Hutchinson's Vicar, he cries out "My God, my God, my youth!"

Yet, this is the type of parochial system and life which diocesan boards of finance are seeking so zealously to perpetuate, now that what has been called the "spring-time of church building" has arrived. The official ecclesiastical mind, while being the most experienced, is also, relatively to its opportunities, the most inept. While faced by long vistas both ways, it is the most short-sighted. While annually uttering grandiloquent periods in diocesan conferences, it is weekly found deficient in words of practical counsel in the committee-room or the study. Their only scheme for the new suburbs is to run up badly-built churches, and to leave them to become empty. Their only scheme for the old suburbs and city centres is to preserve, apart from London, badly-built churches, which have already become empty, because, forsooth, it is their pride to be handed down to posterity as great builders. There is sometimes more virtue in being remembered as great destroyers.

Can the Church Councils save the situation? If so, it will be the first thing they have saved. But it is doubtful. They will consist in these new areas of the same people who joined the Church some years before, when offices were being distributed. The Church is now their hobby, or worse still, a means of advertising

their business. But they dominate the parish. In the place of the parson's autocracy we have set up a domination which is not even wealthy, whose qualifications are a summation of all the minus qualities which go to make a suburban householder.

At the same time no criticism of these people is suggested. The criticism is levelled against those who wantonly hastened to give them birth. The Church Councillors do what they can. They produce what they have. Nothing more can come from them until something more has been breathed into them. Their own existence is drab and dangerous. Yet the Church which is meant to save them, merely accentuates their weaknesses, by providing fresh opportunities for exploiting the instinct to borrow, and by supplying them with a parson whose existence is more drab and more dangerous than their own.

The Church Councils will never reform the clergy, and the clergy are at the centre of the problem. Church Councils may solve the problem of debt on Church buildings, schools, maintenance of the same, and expenses of parochial organisations, but they will not devise a scheme, in these areas, for making one man twice as comfortable as themselves—a scheme which includes the education of his children at their expense.

So the problem of the parson remains. That cry, " My youth, my youth ! " is going up, consciously or unconsciously, from hundreds of clerical hearts. It is the expression of a yearning for sympathy from minds of a like temper and training, for the outward evidences of the moderate culture of the old college and home life, for some outlet for the woes of the spirit into a heart which not only takes off the burden, but pours in the balm of friendly understanding. Youth is made gallant and happy, enterprising and courageous by its friendships. Its friendships are maintained not only by easy intercourse, but by constant intercourse. It is the " communio " of interests, the sharing of mental and spiritual gifts, the existence of a common stock of ideas, hopes, aspirations from which are constantly drawn inspiration to fight down individual fears, apprehensions, blunders and failures. Men learn the art of living happily in youth because they pull together and breathe a similar atmosphere.

Community life ! Why not attempt it in parochial or inter-parochial organisation ? Let the size of the parishes be increased, not decreased. Let them range up to 50,000 souls and more, taking the rural deanery as the unit of organisation. If necessary, let the deaneries be reduced in size and increased in number. Let the deaneries be shepherded by a community consisting of twenty or thirty or more priests and deacons, who are thereby enabled to go on living the human and happy life of youth, sharing a common dining-hall, a common smoking-room and library, separated each in his own quarters for study and reflection and sleep.

Celibacy would, of course, be a condition for all, save the Warden or Rector or Rural-Dean, and his appointment would only be made, if his wife were fitted for the office. The less admirable attitude

of the ladies of the Vicarage towards the assistant clergy could not be tolerated. It must be a community of clergy of equal standing, assisted by a few deacons.

A man who undertook to work in such an area would only be admitted after making a promise of celibacy, to be maintained while he remained a member of the community. On deciding to marry he would be transferred to a parish where marriage was possible on financial grounds, and where social life was such that he would not be dragged down to a level at which he ceased to be an inspiration to the parish. Such areas exist. In such areas a married clergy is the most efficient clergy. But such areas are not the slum regions of big towns or, at present, the suburban regions of the new housing schemes.

The saving of the parish-priest's spirit would be based upon a sound principle of economy—an economy founded upon reducing the personal demands made upon him. While each priest would have his own district for pastoral supervision, and while two priests, or a priest and a deacon, would be attached, in accordance with fourth-century custom, to each church for the administration of the Sacraments, no priest would prepare more than one sermon a week, and while sometimes preaching twice, he would not preach more than once in one church. Moreover, opportunity would be provided for making better use of individual gifts. Talented preachers, effective visitors, efficient organisers of clubs, guilds, and of work among both sexes of various ages could be selected from the members of the community, and regarded as specialists for the deanery.

Holidays could be easily arranged. Books could be easily secured. The absence of family expenses, combined with the communal organisation would enable the area or deanery to be maintained at less cost than under the present ineffective system, while each minister would gain far more in cultural power, spiritual efficiency, and bodily health, than would ever be possible under the present system, without an expenditure of money far beyond the capacity of the Church.

Church-building might cost as much as it does now, because, although fewer churches would be erected, they would be larger, more substantial, more beautifully designed and decorated, and more adequately equipped. By this means alone one of the causes of spiritual deadness would be removed. Even under present arrangements, people attend a well-built, well-appointed church better than a shoddy, draughty, dusty, uncomfortable building.

The economy effected in the stipends of the clergy would be one of the most vital elements of the scheme. No reform can be effected in slum or suburban areas without paying the clergy a sum sufficient to maintain their families in houses four times as big as those of the parishioners, an income at least four times as large as theirs, but then the spiritual influence of the parson would be seriously restricted. He would be regarded in such a case, as the "rich" man of the parish. He would possess the "plum" of the district.

He would be there because he had a good billet. The very moderate comforts supplied by five or six hundred a year to a clerical family in a vicarage house, would appear to be abundant wealth to the slum-dwellers, and to the artisan or clerk trying to bring up a family on two or three pounds a week. But under a community scheme, where the clergy would obtain even more liberal comforts, there would be no parade of wealth, real or imagined. Indeed, stipends sufficient to meet purely personal needs, such as clothes, holiday expenses, golf and so forth, would be rather less than those of the majority of the parishioners. The man in the street is concerned solely with cash payments. Perquisites such as free board, lodgings, and books would not be considered in any comparison made by him between his own lot and that of his parson.

"Well-paid" clergy under the present system are generously considered by a working-class population, only if they are supported by private means. But that day for the Church of England has passed. Indeed, clergy of independent means were never common in congested town or suburban areas, particularly in the North. They were the glory of the country-side of old England, and the inspiration of southern town parishes, up to a generation ago. With their passing has departed a spiritual as well as a social force of great value. If these men were the spiritual fathers of rural parishes, it was partly due to the fixity of their tenure, and to the long periods for which they held office, but more particularly because the squalor of poverty seldom came near the rectory in nineteenth-century England. What expedient can be devised to supply the lack of them in rural areas remains to be devised. But in the towns, and particularly in the new suburban areas which are rapidly springing up, some of the effectiveness of the rural clergy of old England might be regained, if the spirit of the clergy were saved from being broken, by preserving through communal organisation some of the best elements of college and country-life. The spirit of both is the spirit of youth, and the broken clergy of the towns are crying out "My youth! My youth!"