

Bishop Seabury

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BISHOP SEABURY.

That a free, valid, and purely ecclesiastical episcopacy is the key of the catholic position, in one aspect at least of its being, will not be disputed by any reader of the *International Review*.

Let us then, whether the foe we fear most be Romanism, Erastianism, or Indifferentism, recall for our encouragement and instruction the story of Bishop Seabury who by his consecration in 1784 as first bishop of the English-speaking American Church won a great victory in defence of Catholicism at a time when Erastianism and Indifferentism seemed to occupy between them almost the whole field.

His story doubtless is more or less familiar to most English-speaking Churchmen, but better that it should be too often than too seldom told, and it will have its interest and its lesson also for all who at this moment on the Continent of Europe are warring for that same free, valid, and purely ecclesiastical episcopacy for which Seabury's consecration did so much; warring chiefly against Romanism indeed, but partly also against the ever threatening paralysis of Indifferentism and the dangers of a wrong adjustment of the relations between Church and State.

Adequately to appreciate the spiritual condition of the America of Seabury's day we must look back a little to earlier history and see from what origins it had sprung, and I know not how we can do this better with the necessary brevity than by recalling the description of the state of matters at the close of the seventeenth century, given in the retrospect of its own history lately issued by the S. P. C. K. (Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge.)

“About the year 1698 the spiritual state of the American Colonies began to press on the conscience of the Church at home. The unfortunate Bishop of London, whose diocese if not so populous was as exacting as that of his successors, was supposed to have the oversight of a country three thousand miles across the ocean, where settlements of English folk straggled along the coast-line from Maine to Carolina. In the Northern States, where Dissent ruled, Church-people, by means of imprisonments, whippings, and expulsion from the townships, had been scattered as sheep in a wilderness, and there was but one clergyman north of Virginia. In the Southern States, where the Church was in the majority, the condition of affairs was almost beyond belief. In 1696 matters seemed to have reached a crisis, and Bishop Compton appointed as his commissary, Dr Bray, whose piety and ability had been proved by splendid work in England.

Under the auspices of the newly-formed S. P. C. K. Dr Bray set forth on his voyage to America, an adventure not to be undertaken in those days with a light heart. Capture by pirates, death by starvation, thirst, typhus, small-pox, or mutiny, all loomed on the horizon. Willing to spend and be spent to the utmost in the service of Christ and His Church, Dr Bray sold off his worldly possessions to meet the expenses of the voyage and his stay in America. Arriving at his destination he found that the half of the evils had not been told him. Hundreds of miles separated the clergy from each other, and left without elevating outside influences, who can wonder that some of the lonely men fell morally and socially? Without episcopal visitation, without spiritual intercourse, without books, surrounded by settlers who for the most part had but one idea of enjoyment, a vicious, drunken revel, and by gangs of white slaves whose crimes had procured their emigration, without a sympathetic society at home to cheer their solitude by friendly letter and ready help—strong, indeed, must have been the spiritual life that could shine brightly in such an atmosphere. Some there were, thank God, whose praise is in the Church to this day.

As Dr Bray went up and down among the plantations, his heart ached as he saw that the harvest truly was plenteous, but the labourers—how few, how discouraged, how sometimes

unworthy! His keen intelligence saw at once the key to the problem: a bishop to oversee the work, more priests to sustain each other by *esprit de corps*, books to keep their brains from rusting, schools to raise their flocks from the slough of ignorance into which they had fallen. Such was the *foreign* work which first presented itself to the S. P. C. K.

It was soon seen that the work was so gigantic and so urgent that it demanded the whole energies of a special organization, and so the S. P. C. K. brought into being (1701) the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, on which devolved the duty of providing living agents for the Church abroad. In the two or three years, however, in which the S. P. C. K. undertook the work, it secured 'in Maryland a sufficient maintenance for sixteen clergymen, settled their glebes, fixed libraries, and dispersed among the people many thousand practical and devotional books with good effect.' Several of these libraries still exist, and are spoken of by Americans with enthusiastic gratitude."

The war of Independence found matters somewhat improved, but it is a significant fact, bearing closely on our estimate of the condition of the English Church, that neither Dr Bray nor any one of several like minded men that came after him had been able to overcome the Erastian inertia of the hierarchy and obtain a bishop for America. Nicholson, Governor of Maryland (1694—1699), plainly told the Archbishop of Canterbury that "unless bishops can be had the Church will surely decline". Again Dean Berkeley, afterwards Bishop of Cloyne, made great efforts in this sense about the middle of the century, journeying in person to America, and recommending the establishment there of an episcopal college, a scheme "sacrificed" in his son's language "by the worst minister that Britain ever saw". And we find the clergy of Connecticut reminding the English Archbishop in 1783 that "the clergy of several provinces repeatedly applied that one or more bishops might be appointed to reside in America".

Little wonder indeed that they had done so. To cross the Atlantic in those days was no cheap and summer holiday, and of those who went to seek ordination in England one in every five perished.

It is indeed remarkable that such a state of things had so long been tolerated, and while perhaps we can explain it we cannot excuse it. The English Church in her corporate activities was the slave of a secular power wholly indifferent or even hostile to any spiritual conception of her constitution and purposes; many of her own great ones, themselves nominated for their office by the State, were of a like mind, and those who knew better were either powerless or in the presence of political expediency too timid to recognise the needs, and give effect to the inalienable prerogatives of the Church. The S. P. C. K. already mentioned which with its daughter Societies may be held to have wrought the spiritual preservation of England was a private enterprise founded by one presbyter, Dr Bray, and four laymen in 1698; and as to the then spiritual condition of England let us quote once more from the historical retrospect above referred to :

“Let us look at the England of their day. The Commonwealth had striven to make men religious by Act of Parliament, and to crush the joy and beauty out of the life of England. Religion became a synonym for all that was harsh, gloomy, and repellent. The coming of Charles II. brought an inevitable rebound in the national life: strictness gave place to licence, revelling and drunkenness abounded, infidelity and immorality covered the land like a cloud. It was a hard and cruel age too, for sensuality and barbarity ever go hand in hand. Gentlemen (save the mark!) made up parties of pleasure to witness the infliction of cruel punishments on wretched prisoners, and mingled with the herds of debased men and women who yelled with delight at the sufferings of their fellow-creatures, or found amusement in cruel and bloody sports. Among all classes the best instincts of humanity were being stifled, and the Christianity of England seemed almost at its last gasp. “If”, said the Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry in 1724, looking back to that time, “impiety and crime had gone on spreading and increasing among us for the last thirty years, at that prodigious rate as they did for many years before, we had assuredly been one of the most profligate nations in the Christian world.””

And we even find that in 1720 the Archbishop of Canterbury interfered, and successfully, to put a stop to the Society's

project of translating the Bible into Spanish and Italian. Of old time the Church had been sorely tainted with Erastianism, the number and character of the "State Prayers" in our Prayer Book make this only too manifest, but the Revolution had made things worse not better; at a surface glance we are apt to think that it was due to their own excessive Erastianism that the Nonjurors were led into their refusal to accept the Dutchman as King, and that therefore by their elimination the tone in this respect must have been improved, but the fact is that the line of separation between them and their complying brethren was drawn on considerations with which degrees of Erastianism had nothing to do, except indeed in so far that all mere timeservers would of course bow down to the new King and retain their dignified positions. The Nonjurors simply held that the royal prerogatives were inalienable from James and his next heirs in succession; that in any case not even sudden success could turn rebels into de jure royalists; and that in particular the bishops as honourable men were personally bound by the oaths which they had taken. That is, the point of difference was not as to the duties which the Church owed to Caesar, but as to who in effect Caesar was. And when we recollect further that William for political expediency was allowed to sacrifice the Scottish Church without a word of remonstrance from the English episcopate, we are prepared to find that Church life lay thereafter at a low ebb, and that Church principles were little regarded either by the secular power or by those whom it appointed to episcopal sees.

Even so, you will say, we do not quite see why a bishop should not have been consecrated for the American colonies. For these reasons, the population of the colonies in question was largely non-episcopal, hating bishops fiercely, partly on utterly foolish grounds and partly on the mistaken but only too natural idea that a bishop was necessarily a State official, and they were determined that none such should come over to interfere with their religious beliefs and practices. And as the powers in England took very much the same view of the episcopal character, though they were ready to risk a good deal for the sake of a tax on tea, or a stamp duty, they considered it quite out of the question to risk colonial disfa-

your by allowing American churchmen the benefit of a resident bishop; and if they ever realised that he need have no connection whatever with the secular authority, they probably set their faces all the harder against the proposition as tending from their point of view to compromise the dignity of the English prelates. For these reasons then, or the like, fortifying themselves behind technical difficulties, they left the Church in America to struggle as it might, and ill would it have fared but for the timely help of the noble men who founded and carried on the two Societies of which we have already spoken.

Turning to Connecticut with which Bishop Seabury was more particularly associated we find it to have been originally as we might expect absolutely non-episcopal. The first church service held in it was in N. London in 1702 conducted by George Keith, an S. P. G. missionary who was curiously enough a native of Aberdeen, after him also occasional services were held here and there, and at Stratford in 1722 settled ministrations were begun.

In this year also there was presented to their "fathers and brethren" in the library of Yale College by Samuel Johnson of Guilford, Cutler (Rector of the College), and five others, the famous paper touching their ordination, in which these men declared their reasons for their dissatisfaction with any but an episcopal Church, and their own determination to return to the old paths. They had been led to it by a study of the Anglican Divines, prompted thereto in the first instance by a Book of Common Prayer which falling into the hands of Johnson had marvellously attracted him.

The movement thus begun gave the Church in Connecticut a life and vigour that never left it, and the outbreak of the war half a century later found twenty clergy ministering to some forty congregations.

But the close found only fourteen, for unlike their southern brethren they had for the most part sided at least in private sympathy with the King and had suffered in consequence great hardships at the hands of the excited colonists; instances are given in the neighbouring States where these hardships resulted even in death.

Moreover the surrender of the British Government was so complete that no real provision was made for the protection and the restoration of the property of those who in the States were suspected of British sympathies; an asylum in Nova Scotia was however offered to such, and of this many Episcopalians in Connecticut availed themselves carrying with them three of the fourteen clergy already mentioned as found in that State at the close of the war. So far however were the clergy themselves from taking part in political agitation that their steady spiritual conduct bore visible fruit, and we are told even as early as May 1782 that many serious minded dissenters, disgusted with the furious politics of their own pulpits, were coming over to the church. Yet not, I suppose, in such numbers as to compare with those who were fleeing from the country.

In March 1783 ten of the eleven clergy met at Woodbury, almost in secrecy, and determined that without delay a duly consecrated bishop must be obtained; for, in addition to all the elements of pressing need already referred to, it would lay them open to damning suspicion of disloyalty to the States to be in constant communication with, and under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of London, even if that Prelate were able and willing to continue the responsibility; the need for a bishop on the spot to aid in building up that which was broken down and in organising a duly equipped and independent Church was pressing; delay would but add to the political difficulties and even result in the establishment of a merely nominal episcopate, rising from a popular instead of an apostolic source. In fact some nine months earlier the Rev. William White, a Pennsylvanian Clergyman, had published a pamphlet urging the adoption of this course, under a plea of necessity indeed and with the safeguard of a formal declaration that when opportunity offered its defects should be made good, but to flee at the outset to the last refuge of despair is not the way to produce worthy results, and this ill-advised scheme had no small part in stirring up to action the clearer sighted clergy of Connecticut.

They choose for their bishop the Rev. Jeremiah Leaming, late of Norwalk, but foreseeing that, as actually occurred, his advancing years might deter him from undertaking the neces-

sary fatigues and dangers, they name as an alternative the Rev. Samuel Seabury, late of Westchester County in New York.

Seabury was a native of Connecticut, born in November 1729, the son of one who, having been a Congregationalist minister, had been led to examine and accept the claims of episcopacy and had in consequence himself obtained Holy Orders in England. Samuel with whom we are concerned, after spending a year in Edinburgh to perfect his medical training was ordained at the age of twenty-four at Fulham, receiving deacon's orders on St. Thomas's Day and priest's two days later; along with him was ordained a Scotchman William Smith, of whom we shall hear later.

Seabury returned at once to work in America, not however in his native State, and had been for some time settled at Westchester when the troubles began. He was, and with justice, suspected by the Colonials of being the author of several spirited pamphlets, published at the beginning of the ferment, which urged the people to abide in loyalty to the British rule, and was in consequence when the war broke out subjected to imprisonment and other hardships. Driven at length in fear of his life to take refuge with the British troops he both served as Military Chaplain and practised as a medical man.

Their election to the bishopric found both Leaming and Seabury in New York which was at that time crowded with refugees, and indeed on that account could not be evacuated by the British until seven months after the proclamation of peace, by which time the refugees were for the most part settled in Nova Scotia.

No records of the meeting at Woodbury were kept, we do not even know the names of all that were present, but one of them Daniel Fogg in writing to a brother cleric in Massachusetts tells that they were unanimously agreed on the course adopted, that they intended that if on the one hand the returning bishop were denied entrance to the States he should reside in Nova Scotia, and that if on the other hand the English Bishops should refuse to ordain their candidate he had been instructed to apply to the Scottish episcopate.

These ten were men who knew the times and had understanding of their work.

We may remark here that the idea of having recourse to Scotland was not originated by the Woodbury Meeting, as early as the times of Dr Bray himself, as well as in the intervening period men had contemplated the possibility of so doing, but matters had never come to a head; it would have been a terrible thing to have any dealings with the Jacobites.

Letters were written both to the Archbishop of Canterbury and to the Archbishop of York, and with these along with testimonials and letters of recommendation from the clergy of New York Seabury arrived in London on the 7th of July. The New York Clergy also spoke in favour of Dr Chandler, who driven by the war from New Jersey was now in England, and who it was hoped might be sent out as a Bishop to Nova Scotia the new home of the refugees.

But paralysis still held the English Church and Seabury was met by difficulty after difficulty in a way that seems almost incredible to us as we read the details of the story.

It was urged that there might "be no adequate support for a Bishop". To this it was replied that an American Bishop must indeed be "of the primitive style" and "must rest for support on the Church which he serves, unornamented with temporal dignity and without the props of secular power".

It was urged again that to comply with the request "would be sending a Bishop to Connecticut which they (the English Bishops) have no right to do without the consent of the State".

So St. Paul might equally have refused to go into Macedonia without the consent of the Roman Governor. But as a wise prudence would indeed seek the consent of the State if thereby unjust suspicions and evil surmisings might be set at rest, so enquiry was made of the leading member of the Connecticut Assembly who gave assurance that the presence of a bishop would be looked on with favour, and pointed to a law recently passed which guaranteed perfect liberty to any religious body to conduct its own internal affairs in its own way; but even this was deemed in England insufficient.

Moreover there remained the difficulty of dispensing with the oaths of allegiance to King George in the consecration service, and this was held to be insurmountable without a

special Act of Parliament, the inheritors of 1688 having become marvellously scrupulous as to the very shadow of a technical irregularity.

At last however it seemed as if success were in sight, for there was talk of the necessary Act being obtained, and for this Seabury well nigh at the end of his slender resources resolved to wait. But when the promised Act appeared it was found to provide only that the Bishop of London might dispense with the oaths of allegiance in ordaining priests and deacons for foreign parts, that is practically that the ecclesiastical state of matters existing before the war might remain unaltered. Its authors show no consciousness whatever of the existence of the Catholic Church and seem to have imagined simply that they were humouring the respectable fancy that certain persons had for belonging to the Church of *England*, irrespective of the country they might be in.

The Archbishops refused to move and Seabury had perforce to seek elsewhere. Even Dr Chandler's consecration for Nova Scotia was still put off and indeed finally abandoned.

Not for a moment does it seem ever to have entered the minds of the Archbishops that ecclesiastical rank with its attendant responsibilities was in itself a thing utterly independent of the Civil powers, and that while it was quite proper that certain definite relations should exist between the Government of a country and the corresponding branch of the Catholic Church, that for example the bishops should be called on to make open profession of loyalty, it was absurd to suppose that the laws embodying these relations had either in justice or in design any reference whatsoever to an emergency of the Catholic Church calling upon the bishops to act in their purely spiritual capacity in a foreign land where the civil relations in question were ipso facto null and void and altogether impossible. That while it was undoubtedly their duty not needlessly to run counter to the desires and prejudices of their civil ruler, yet in case of conflict their spiritual commission was paramount in spiritual matters and must be obeyed even at the cost of suffering.

Not that there was much danger of such a contest. Had the Archbishops quietly consecrated Seabury, standing on their spiritual duties and assuming that it was an obvious absurdity

to apply the strict letter of the law to an emergency never contemplated by its framers and in its nature utterly outside the true intent of its operation, it is not likely that even had such an absurdity been technically possible, the penalties of *praemunire* would have been demanded from them; or had they let it be seen that they were in earnest and claimed spiritual freedom as their inalienable right in the last resort, but were seeking technical legality as the more excellent way, I think that Seabury would not have been in the end sent away empty. But throughout the whole business there is not a sign of their ever having risen to appreciation of their rights and responsibilities, and their conduct in the matter is as if the apostles in the infant Church in Jerusalem had utterly refused to appoint Matthias without the formal consent of the Sanhedrin.

Seabury then, having spent nearly fourteen months in his vain endeavour, turns definitely to the Scottish Church. He had previously warned the Connecticut Clergy that the necessity of this step seemed to him imminent, and had begged them, if it seemed to them premature, to stop him and to send over in his place some other man who might succeed where he had failed.

The Scottish Church was still under the ban of the penal laws, but though these were not at all rigorously enforced at this time, the slightest indiscretion might lead to disastrous results.

The Scottish Bishops however, though they were not at all desirous of attracting more attention to themselves than necessary, and were careful to take every precaution in reason that might tend to the safety of their own Church, recognised it as their duty without reserve, that, as Bishop Skinner subsequently expressed it in his sermon preached at the consecration, "the successors of the Apostles are obliged by the commission which they hold to contribute as far as they can to the formation of every Church upon the most pure and primitive model. No fear of worldly censure ought to keep them back from so good a work, no connection with any State, nor dependence on any government whatever should tie up their hands from communicating the blessing of that kingdom which is not of this world".

They had indeed during the progress of the war refused to entertain the proposal of certain English well-wishers of the American Church to send out a bishop as from their own initiative, but that would have been a very improper as well as provocative action, and they were right in holding their hands. Now however when the request comes from a competent body of clergy, they are ready to proceed; of which disposition on their part Seabury had obtained assurance indirectly before making formal application. No delay is interposed and in Aberdeen on the 14th November 1784 the candidate is consecrated by the Primus, Bishop Kilgour, along with Bishops Skinner and Petrie.

J. T. F. FARQUHAR, M. A.

(To be continued.)
