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NATIONAL CHURCHES.

A Lecture of the Canon Meyrick at the Norwich Diocesan Conference April 3, 1902.

The following resolution was carried at the Norwich Diocesan Conference by a majority of 68 to 6:

“That ideally the visible Church consists of a federation of autonomous National Churches in communion with one another; that it is the right and duty of each of these Churches to maintain the Catholic Faith; and that to each individual Churchman the voice of his Church is the voice of the Catholic Church.”

Canon Meyrick, in moving the resolution, said: We see that the visible Church Catholic in the earliest ages consisted of the Churches of Galatia, Corinth, Rome, Ephesus, Colossae, Philippi, Thessalonica, Crete, and other districts or cities. Relatively to each other, all these Churches were autonomous and independent, while they recognised a superior authority either in the apostle who had converted them or in the assembled body of apostles, presbyters, and brethren.

Pass on to the fourth century. The Emperor Constantine divided the whole of the Roman Empire—that is, the civilised world—into fourteen districts for administrative purposes, to which the name of diœceses (*διοικήσεις*), to be distinguished from dioceses, was given, “each of which”, says Gibbon, “equalled the just measure of a powerful kingdom”.

These diœceses were the East (that is, the country round Antioch), Egypt, Proconsular Asia, Pontus, Thrace, Macedonia, Dacia, North Italy, South Italy, Illyria, Africa, Spain, Gaul, Britain. They were each governed by a Præfect or Vice-Præfect, and were divided into provinces, and the provinces into smaller units. The Church, which at all times conformed itself in its external regimen to the political state of the coun-

tries in which she was, at once constituted fourteen Diœcesan Churches, one for each diœcese, each Diœcesan Church being ruled by a Primate, each province by a Metropolitan, and the smaller units by Bishops, who were suffragans of the Metropolitans.

Like the Churches of the New Testament, these fourtene Diœcesan Churches were autonomous and independent relatively to each other, and no fewer than eleven canons were passed by the first four General Councils to guard that independence. They were, however, combined together by the internal cohesion of the indwelling Spirit, by their One Head and by a common faith, with respect to which if any question arose, there lay an appeal to a Council consisting of delegates of all the Churches, who, coming from all parts of the world and bringing their testimony with them, might be expected to confirm the ancient and, therefore, true belief.

The equality of the fourteen Diœcesan Churches into which Christendom was divided was first disturbed by the pride of the Roman Emperors, who thought that *their* bishop should stand higher than other bishops, and, therefore, the boy Gratian, A. D. 378, and Valentinian, A. D. 445, gave the Bishop of Rome a right to receive appeals from the Western Empire, which led to an undefined authority being placed in his hands over the Bishops of North Italy, France, and Spain—three of the hitherto independent Diœcesan Churches.

The great Eastern See of Constantinople—the seat of the Eastern Emperor—would not be left behind. The Council of Chalcedon, A. D. 451, gave to the See of Constantinople an even more immediate authority over three others of the Diœcesan Churches—those of Asia, Pontus, and Thrace—together with the right of receiving appeals from any part of the Church Catholic.

In spite of these encroachments of the two great and ambitious sees, the diœcesan or federal constitution of the Church continued till the diœceses were themselves overrun and occupied by the barbarians who overthrew the Empire. As soon as these tribes where settled and Christianised, nations, thus formed, took the place of diœceses, and National Churches of the Diœcesan Churches. The National Churches still retained the independence of each other enjoyed by the Diœcesan

Churches, and the eleven canons of the first four Councils commanding the autonomy of the Diœcesan Churches now applied to the National Churches.

How jealously this independence was guarded I will instance in two cases, in the National Churches of Spain and Britain.

Two events will be sufficient in Spanish history. The decrees of the fifth Œcumenical Council, A. D. 553, were not submitted to the Spanish Church. For this reason Spain would not admit that council into her code, though having no objection to it in point of doctrine. The decrees of the sixth Œcumenical Council, A. D. 681, *were* submitted to her Primate, and sent by him to his five Metropolitans for consideration in synod, and, being approved, were then adopted by the fourteenth Council of Toledo, which, however, annexed to them four canons on the subject dealt with. Pope Benedict II. ventured to object to some of the Spanish statements as incautious. At once the fifteenth Council of Toledo was summoned, which endorsed the Spanish view, and told the Italian Primate that they would "follow the steps of their ancestors", however much "ignorant rivals might be displeased".

The same lesson of national independence is taught by the early history of our own Church. We all know the spirited reply given by the British Bishops to Augustine, refusing to accept any interference by a foreign prelate or admit his jurisdiction; and we know that the Anglo-Saxon Church retained its autonomy untouched down to the Norman Conquest. Then the French Bishops uncanonically thrust into all the English sees by William I. brought with them the antagonistic idea of an ecclesiastical monarchy, which, having been introduced by the False Decretals, A. D. 830, had grown up in the Empire of Charlemagne. That unprimitive idea of a monarchy was brought from France into England by Lanfranc and Anselm, became dominant in the reigns of John and Henry III., and was not cast out, though strongly resisted, until the forgery of the Decretals was demonstrated in the fifteenth century, whereupon the supremacy founded upon them was repudiated in the sixteenth century, and the old idea of National independence was recovered.

2. The second point. None can doubt that it is the duty of each National Church to maintain the Catholic Faith—*quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus creditum*—and this implies the further duty of rejecting corruptions of that faith and instituting a reformation where necessary. Here I quote Laud and Hooker; “Is it such a strange thing,” says Laud, “that a particular Church may reform itself if the general will not? To reform what is amiss in doctrine or manners is as lawful for a particular Church as it is to publish or promulgate anything that is Catholic... It is more than clear that if the Roman Church will neither reform nor suffer reformation, it is lawful for any particular Church to reform itself, so long as it does it peaceably and orderly and keeps itself to the foundation and free from sacrilege” (*Conference*). And Hooker: “The indisposition, therefore, of the Church of Rome to reform herself must be no stay unto us from performing our duty to God; even a desire of retaining conformity with them could be no excuse if we did not perform that duty. With Rome we dare not communicate concerning sundry her gross and grievous abominations” (*Eccl. Pol. III.*).

I do not pause to labour this point. It does not require more argument than is supplied by these extracts from Laud and Hooker. The duty of maintaining truth connotes the duty of rejecting its corruption. And there is no limitation to the right of a National Church in self-reform provided that in matters of faith it “keeps to the foundation” (otherwise it would be an apostacy and not a reformation) and that in matters of ritual it provides for due administration of the Sacraments ordained by Christ; as to ceremonies it may order or abrogate any that it pleases. There is no ceremonial or ritual law of the Church Catholic. This is the statement formally made by Dr. Roberston, Principal of King’s College, and accepted by Bishops Gore and Moule, at the Fulham Conference of 1900; and it is implied by the well-known words of our Article XXXIV, that “every particular or National Church hath authority to ordain, change, or abolish ceremonies or rites of the Church ordained only by man’s authority”. I have, indeed, heard that it has been said that this rule of Article XXXIV is inconsistent with the statement in Article XX, that “the Church hath power to decree rites and ceremonies”

—a very strange proposition! The Church *has* the power, as stated in Article XX, and it exercises it by the action of local Churches, appointing varying ceremonies “according to the diversities of countries, times, and men’s manners”, and these ceremonies it then adds (in Article XXXIV.) are variable by the same authority that appointed them. There is no opposition.

3. Thirdly, while each National Church is bound to reform itself as soon as it realises that its faith has become corrupted, and may act freely in doing so, individual members of a Church, or indeed of any society, must regard the judgment of that Church or society, as long as they belong to it, to be to them final. This is evidently the case with regard to ceremonies, which, once instituted by a society, whether a Church or a club, are therefore binding on all the members of that society. If a club ordered that its members should dine in their hats, they must do so, or leave the club. It is also the case with respect to the ritual of the sacraments and public worship appointed by the local Church. It is no less the case in matters of faith. The Church to which a man belongs declares, by what it says and by what it does not say, what in her judgment the Catholic faith is, and any appeal from her to the Catholic Church at large is not an appeal to the Catholic Church, but to the private judgment of the appellant as to what is or is not the Catholic faith. The Church says, “This is the Catholic faith—the faith and the whole faith”; and she holds out her Prayer-book. A. B., a member of the Church, says, “I judge differently as to the component elements of the Catholic faith”. Here two questions arise. 1. Which is likely to be most right in estimating what is or is not the Catholic faith—the Church or the individual member of the Church? 2. How ought we to regard the attitude taken up by the individual, still remaining a member of the Church? On the first point the last year has given us an object lesson. The Church has forbidden saint-worship; it is not, she says, part of the Catholic faith and practice, not a Catholic custom. But last year A. B. claimed the right of reciting the “Hail, Mary”, which contains a prayer to a saint, on the ground that it was a Catholic custom. Now, a Catholic custom must be one that has always existed. But the “Hail, Mary”, as it exists at present, springing up sporadically in the fifteenth century, was first sanctioned in 1568,

that is, six years later than our Articles. And yet it is called a Catholic custom! So little likely is it that the judgment of individual members of a Church, easily misled by false quotations, should be superior to the judgment of the Church herself.

But this is not all. How are we to regard the attitude of one who appeals from his Church to himself under cover of the word Catholic? Surely as one of great disloyalty, which demands a *laudabiliter se subjecit* from any one who has been betrayed into it, unless the matter be to him so grave that it becomes necessary for him to separate from his Church for the sake of maintaining the truth.

“There is no part of the Catholic faith,” says Bishop Andrewes, “that we do not hold. Those tenets of yours (addressing Bellarmine) are patches on the faith, not parts of it” (*Resp. ad Bell.*, p. 485).
