

ON BEING A BISHOP IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Perhaps I should begin by explaining the phrase 'in the Church of England', and saying why I have preferred that to the more common phrase 'being an Anglican Bishop'. The fact is that there are enormous differences (although, of course, certain similarities) between being a Bishop in the Church of England and being a Bishop anywhere else in the Anglican Communion. The task of a Bishop in the C. of E. is one that has developed over many centuries, and although it is continually changing it has certain traditions, duties and privileges built into it of a quite special nature. Members of the Church of Scotland will understand something of what this means because of their own position in an Established Church. I remember (years before I became a Bishop) a trusted Bishop in the Church of England saying to me that of all the posts anyone could occupy there were few that gave such opportunities for Christian evangelism and pastoral work as that of a Bishop in the Church of England. I think I can say, after nearly twenty-one years experience of being a Bishop, that I have found this to be true, however limited one's own contribution to these great tasks may have been.

There is no shortage of theoretical statements about what the work of an Anglican Bishop is. We began to hammer this out in the Conversations between the Church of England and the Church of Scotland held in the forties, of which I happened to be the Anglican Secretary. A modern statement on similar lines can be quoted from a General Synod paper, written by Canon Paul Welsby quite recently on 'Episcopacy in the Church of England'. He describes the work of the Bishop (himself quoting from another Report) in the following terms: 'The bishop as guardian of the apostolic faith is the centre of the unity of a diocese. He has responsibilities which he cannot entirely delegate to others and bears the ultimate responsibility for decisions in his diocese. His cathedral Church is where he has his *cathedra*, which he occupies as one who holds an apostolic office and as leader in presenting the Gospel to the world. Within the family of the Church he carries his authority, as himself under authority, by virtue of his divine commission, and in association with the clergy and laity. He exercises with sympathy and understanding pastoral care and discipline in relation to the brotherhood of the clergy in his diocese. He must also be active in establishing and maintaining closer relationships with other communions in the diocese. . . . Besides being leader and inspirer of Christian living and



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thought within his diocese, he is a bishop within the world-wide Church. He shares responsibilities outside his own diocese and should try to keep his diocese conscious of the larger sphere. In England, too, by virtue of establishment, all diocesan bishops have national and civic responsibilities and opportunities'. I do not think I could improve on that as a theoretical description.

I feel that my own contribution in this magazine will be more interesting if I write in very personal terms, and try to explain something of what my own experience as a Bishop has been.

Let me begin with the process of becoming a Bishop. Of course any Christian man being entrusted with such a task realizes his own inadequacy and relies enormously on the prayers and good wishes of his friends, but I should not be honest if I did not say that there is a tremendous thrill and excitement connected with one's appointment as a Bishop. This is really inevitable because through one's earlier life and ministry one has looked up to Bishops and seen them fulfilling very special functions in the life of the Church; suddenly to find that one is admitted to this very special privilege creates in most normal people a great sense of thankfulness and expectancy. In my own case the letter of my appointment came from Sir Winston Churchill, which I freely admit added to my own enjoyable excitement at the time, but the actual consecration was, of course, far more spiritually significant. This took place in Canterbury Cathedral. I cannot go into great detail about it but I will just say that I came down the Cathedral at the end of the service in procession, hand in hand with the then Archbishop of Canterbury, and we were all singing the hymn

'Forth in Thy Name, O Lord I go
My daily labour to pursue'.

I have often thought of this moment. For twenty-one years I have tried to pursue my daily labour. I can only thank God for His great goodness to me in giving sufficient health and strength to carry on, and enabling me to see sufficient encouragement in my work to feel that God was still calling me day by day to this particular work.

When you have become a Bishop you have to learn the job. In modern times rather more steps are taken than previously to give preliminary courses to new Bishops, but in my day you were thrown in at the deep end and expected to swim. I cannot say that I regret having become a Bishop during those old-fashioned days. My own picture of a Bishop's work had been largely influenced by Bishop Henry Wilson of Chelmsford, who had ordained me, and afterwards made me one of his Examining Chaplains; and I had formed from him a picture of a Bishop as the chief pastor and leading evangelist in a considerable area of England. Of course a great deal of a

Bishop's mission is carried out through the clergy whom he ordains and appoints, but there remains a residuum of personal responsibility, which only he can discharge.

Once having started, one begins to see the work dividing up into separate departments, although all are related to each other.

There is first of all what I call the liturgical side. Here I mean those special functions which are still confined to the Order of Bishops in our Church. Foremost among them is, of course, Ordination. This includes the selection of candidates, decision about their training, final preparation in the Ordination Retreat and the conduct of the Ordination itself. In all this work the Bishop is guided and helped by colleagues, but the ultimate responsibility remains his. In my Ordinal I have the names of 188 men who have been ordained during my episcopate. Around many of them fascinating stories could be told. I mention briefly only one – a working-class boy who, at sixteen, was so bored that on hearing a church bell he decided to go and see what was happening. He came from an entirely non-religious home, but he was converted to God, eventually became an ordinand, and after many vicissitudes was ordained. I made him Gospeller at the service, and I have never felt such a sense of apostolic succession as I laid hands on one who had become to me in a very real sense 'my son Timothy'.

Then, of course, there is the continual work of Confirmation, where one is kept in touch with many hundreds of younger people. I do not pretend that the work of Confirmation is easy at the present time. Candidates have tended to polarise into the very young or the fully mature. The maturing adolescent, whom we used to know, has largely disappeared from the scene. I cannot say that this has increased my enjoyment of Confirmations, but they still remain very sacred and precious opportunities. In addition to the actual confirming work there is always the opportunity of explaining to the general congregation what the Christian religion is all about. Many of them understand it much better when they hear it explained for those who are much younger than themselves! I have always found that however tired I am after a day's work in committee or office, to face a crowd of young people for Confirmation is a tonic and a refreshment.

Then there is what I call consecration, by which I mean dedicating new organs, opening new churches and all that kind of thing. These are occasions where the Bishop is always wanted. I personally regard all these occasions as valuable opportunities for teaching and for proclaiming the Gospel. A re-dedication of a restored church often produces a very large congregation, and provides a very special opportunity to show the people what the church is for.

Then there are the more directly pastoral aspects of the work (not,

of course, that the processes already described are not also themselves fully pastoral). Here, however, I mean the task of providing the Ministry for the parishes. The Bishop not only has to see to it that there is an influx of new young Ministers, but he has to see that every parish is sooner or later provided with a godly Minister. This involves knowing both the men available and the parishes. If one is Bishop of a diocese for a long time as I have been, it is inevitable that the body of clergy to some extent reflects the interests and contacts of the Bishop himself. Having previously been Principal of a Theological College it is, I suppose, not surprising that there are a good many of my former students now happily working in my diocese.

There are also all the pastoral problems; questions concerning the health of the clergy and their wives and families; questions about their finances, their houses, and their own parochial pastoral problems. Although the actual power of the Bishop is in many cases limited, there is still a considerable *auctoritas* attaching to him. Very frequently when he cannot command he can advise, and his advice is very frequently taken as a command.

Finally there is what I shall call the administrative side of his work. This is perhaps the most exacting, and sometimes exhausting aspect of the task. I receive about twenty letters a day, and if one lets them lie unanswered one is soon presented with a full and bulging In-tray, and problems are left undealt with, some of which are urgent. Experience, and a good secretary, of course, help enormously to keep this problem at bay. We are now, however, in the middle of a new form of synodical government, and this means that there is a unified structure of control in certain matters running through the General Synod in London, through the Diocesan Synod and down to the Deanery Synods. The Bishop normally presides over his Diocesan Synod, and is a member of the General Synod. This means that his guidance and counsel are expected over a wide range of topics, in some of which he is expected to become expert. I have myself been for many years Chairman of the Church of England Board for Social Responsibility, Vice-Chairman of the Church of England Council on Foreign Relations and Chairman of the Council of the Bible Reading Fellowship. As one who has always been interested in New Testament Studies I have continued to write and lecture on these matters, and have laid considerable emphasis on the teaching aspect of a Bishop's work.

In the wider world I need not go further than mention my membership of the House of Lords. This is by no means just a matter of honour and glory. Hard work is involved in attendance and particularly in the preparation of speeches. It is, however, a most stimulating assembly to belong to, and I shall always be

grateful for the opportunity both of listening and contributing to the wide-ranging discussions that take place in the House of Lords.

If I wanted to choose a text which has been a kind of guiding star in my work I should refer to II Corinthians 13, v. 10. 'The authority which the Lord gave me for building up and not for casting down.'

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