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The St Mary's Heritage Project

A sermon preached in S. Mary's Church, Glasgow,
by the Incumbent, the Rev. Frederic Edward Ridgeway,
on the Dedication Festival, November 11th, 1883.

SOURCE:

S. Mary's Glasgow Magazine, February, 1884.

[RGE, 2009]

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Eph. iii. 15. The whole Family in Heaven and Earth.

Thus does S. Paul describe the Church of Christ, and the more closely we examine the figure the more forcibly must we be struck with the aptness of the illustration. Constantly as we read the writings of the great Apostle, we are confronted by figures of speech which bring home to us the *nature of the Christian Church*. Now he sketches it as the luxuriant tree, stretching out its branches far and wide, offering shelter beneath its welcome shade, and with its leaves for the healing of the nations. Now he describes it as the magnificent structure, slowly rising in all its stately grandeur; and now as the perfect symmetry of the human body, each part 'holding the head.' But I think he is more true to his purpose, that he appeals most closely to our warmest sympathies, when he gathers up all the other features of it into one homely illustration -

The whole family in Heaven and Earth.

What then, by brethren, may we learn from this figure - first, as to what the Church of Jesus Christ is, and then (as concerns us chiefly today) what every congregation within that Church should be:

- a. We learn something in the first place as to the *nature* of the Christian Church; that its members are linked to each other; that it holds together because of, not accidental circumstances, but spiritual affinities and natural ties, 'the whole family.' The illustration presupposes that idea. A family is built up upon affinities that are purely natural, not artificial. It is not a combination. It is a society. Men *are* linked together by accidental circumstances, by common interests - sudden peril, political creed, identical tastes - widely differing, perhaps, in all things beside. But all these are purely artificial combinations; their end must be dissolution. Society grows older, new principles prevail, habits change, opinions alter; combination, because it is artificial, becomes a thing of the past.

It is not so with *family life*. It is not founded on taste, opinion, choice; you do not choose who your blood relations shall be. It is founded on affinities that are purely natural, and that because they are natural cannot perish. Just so it is with the Church of Christ. It is not an accidental combination of persons linked together by their common preference for a particular form of worship; this idea lies at the root of almost all our unhappy division. It is founded on a deeper, truer, basis. 'By One Spirit ye are baptised into One Body.' No mere surface preference for this or that form of worship could save it from being as short-lived as all accidental combinations must more or less be. 'One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism.' This it is which gives us the right to say -

I believe in one Catholic and Apostolic Church.

This gives us the right to sing -

*Crowns and thrones may perish,
Kingdoms rise and wane;
But the Church of Jesus,
Constant will remain.*

- b. Again, we learn something as to the *Constitution* of the Christian Church - 'One family.'

The illustration seems to teach us that if it claims the unity of a family life, it is an unity which springs out of variety. In what, we may ask, does that variety consist? Think for a moment of the illustration. *In what lies the diversity of family life?* Certainly, in *character*, does it not? That would be but a colourless home where no such diversity existed, where every character was moulded on the lives of the other. The masculine and the feminine elements, the intellectual and the emotional, the grave and gay - these make up the real happiness and charm of home life; and so also in taste and opinion, the different talents developing in their own special channels; the differing opinions lovingly but firmly adhered to; the different callings, enterprise, commerce, philanthropy, even to the invalid member of the family, to whom all turn for sympathy and advice, whose sick-room is a very council chamber. It is these varieties, countless, shading off into a thousand degrees, that make up the *Oneness* of the home.

It is so, and it is meant to be so, in the Church of Jesus Christ. Like her God - THREE in the varied offices of the Divine Persons, but ONE in an undivided, indivisible union; so, in the Church, with her laity and clergy, her poor and rich, her active toilers, and contemplative lives, her sick ones taking part in the common work by the quiet intercessions of their lone sick-rooms. The Church, in the diversity of her operations, is 'One family.'

Now, brethren, you will not wonder if I wish to transfer the illustration from the Church to the congregation. There are days in family history - marked days - when we love to gather round us all that are left - days when past and present and future seem gathered up into one; when the mercies that have been, the difficulties that are, the possibilities of the time that is yet to be, pass before us in swift review - days of gladness and days of thought. Such should be the Dedication Festival, the anniversary of the opening of a Church to the congregation which worships within its walls, unless our Church is no more to us (and I fear it is so with some) than the hall in which we listen to an entertainment; unless we do not believe, or at least do not realise, that 'This is in very truth the House of God,' that 'The Lord is in this place'; unless our attendance here be a mere perfunctory duty, a debt discharged out of deference to social custom, and, therefore, hardly better than a mere mockery of the Eternal God. Surely we may wake up on such a day to something of interest in that House of God, where our little

ones have been baptised; where we ourselves, or our children, have been confirmed; where we have been spoken to of the love of God our Father, fed with the live-giving Bread of Life, and into which we shall be carried, some of us, when our working days are over and our race is run.

What then should be our thoughts today?

- a. 'The whole family in Heaven and Earth.' It is natural that they should be with the *vacant places*; that they should linger a moment with the *dead*, Prominently some forms stand before us - vacant places in our Father's Home - a long procession of holy souls - known many of them to you, and not a few within the last five years to myself - who loved their Church, and owned almost with their parting breath that they had found within her walls 'the things which belonged unto their peace,' Truly we can bless His Holy Name today for all those departed in His faith and fear, and ask grace 'to follow their good examples.'

But what is the ruling thought about them?

'The whole family.' You find it there - 'We are not divided: all one body we.'

*One family, we dwell in Him;
One Church above, beneath;
Though now divided by the stream,
The narrow stream of Death.*

Yes! they are with us still. The members of a family are its members still when the Atlantic rolls between them, or the desert stretches far away between their homes and ours. So it is with the greater separation -

Still she answered, 'We are seven.'

We love to feel it so. The family cannot really be broken up. The chair may be empty, but the child is there. Nay, they are nearer now than then. The commonplace surroundings of their lives hid from us the beauty of their characters. We know them better now than we knew them then. It is the old lesson: we value our blessings when we have lost them - the child its father; the congregation its clergy; the dying man his church. Think of it today - 'The whole family.' Let a common worship give expression to a common feeling - 'With angels and archangels, and all the company of Heaven, we laud and magnify His glorious name.'

- b. But this must not be our leading thought today. Its main feature is not sadness, even though tinged with hope. The *mercies* of past years stand before us. 'O God, our help in ages past.' Those words have been realised to some extent in our life as a congregation. I can only speak of the past five years. It is not that I am depreciating or forgetting the far longer labour of those who have stood before me in this place - but I have no right to speak of any longer period - and yet, even within that period of time, what mercies have been ours. When I remember that during these five years some 4,000 services have been held in this Church, some 600

sermons preached, 600 candidates confirmed, the Holy Sacrament of the body and blood of Christ celebrated 700 times, and that 21,000 persons have communicated at that altar - from 3000 in the first of those five years to nearly double that number in the last - I must ask you, my brethren, what of all these privileges? Are they nothing for which to be thankful? nothing for which to tremble? Remember the words - the awe-inspiring words - of Jesus Christ -

If I had not come and spoken to them, they had not had sin, but now they have no cloak for their sin.

- c. And then the *difficulties* of the present. One difficulty springs out of those blessings which we thankfully acknowledge today. There is worshipping now within the walls of this Church the largest congregation that has ever gathered in S. Mary's. I think this fact is sometimes lost sight of. I feel sure that it is sometimes forgotten that there is a difficulty attaching to the very magnitude. Of course, the head of any work, and especially of a large town charge, is a fair subject for criticism, even were it not always of the kindest description. No one would even wish to complain of this, if the critics have grasped the facts of the case and the difficulties of the situation.

I have heard it said, with regret, that the congregation of S. Mary's do not see as much of their clergymen as they would like to see, and though the remark most often comes to me second-hand, still I am thankful to say it is sometimes said frankly to myself. No one regrets this more than I do. I fear that the only remedy is to find a substitute, if not of superhuman power, certainly of far greater powers than I possess. The congregation of S. Mary's is as large as some of the largest London congregations. It is scattered over an area about as wide as a dozen London parishes. The visitation, which in London can be done in a day, cannot, from this cause, be done in Glasgow in the best part of a week. Again, we have three churches - three separate congregations. S. Mary's, S. Peter's, S. George's all with full services and full parochial organization - day schools, Sunday schools, guilds, temperance societies, provident schemes, bands of hope, &c., &c., such as any separate parish church in England could have, and we have to care for the wants material and spiritual of some 3000 poor. Thus the Incumbent of S. Mary's has practically the supervision of three separate parishes; and even if he be supported by his assistant clergy as loyally and ably as I am supported, the burden cannot be anything but a very heavy one to one who, with countless other claims upon his time, must bear the responsibility and direct the progress of every part of so large a work.

This, then, is how the matter stands. I speak thus not for the sake of magnifying my work - (I am speaking to my own people, who know me too well, I hope, to think that of me) - I speak quite as much for the sake of those who shall hereafter stand in my place, and because it is right that you should know how matters stand.

One very real difficulty I have. I go to my people as often as I can. They very seldom - far too seldom - come to me. I am very often not even told of sickness until it has ended in recovery or in the approach of death. I am supposed in such a

church as S. Mary's and with such a congregation, to discover cases of sickness by absence from church - a simple impossibility - and while I am thus deprived of the most precious part of my work - sympathising with and helping my people in their times of need - those who have neglected to apprise me of those times of trouble are apt, with a curious inconsistency, to consider themselves neglected.

d. And now one word as to the future. One message seems to me to come to us today -

Set thine house in order.

A Dedication Festival should surely be a time for new, fresh effort - for brave resolution. Where is that effort most needed with us? 'The whole family.' Brethren, there is in every home what may be called 'The law of the house.' It is its ruling principle, its atmosphere, its tone, its spirit, which all unconsciously imbibe, and to which all contribute. It filters down from the head, it is the 'Law of the house.'

So must it be with a congregation. What is the law of your spiritual home, people of S. Mary's? Sometimes in the family it is *Love of the home*. It is on this ground I have urged, pressed upon you, the necessity for consecrating our Church. It is not merely that I could not myself continue to conduct the services of a church, unconsecrated only for lack of money to set it free from debt, but because it must be the natural outcome of the *love of the home*. It is said, I know, that consecration is a meaningless ceremony, that we can worship as profitably in a barn as in a consecrated building. Certainly (and it is difficult to acquit such a remark of the most intense worldliness), you can entertain your friends in a barn, but you think you do more honour to them and to yourself by receiving them in your well-appointed houses. Have more *love of your home*, and such shallow objections will be heard no more; your church will be not a strange place to you expect on one day in the week. You will grudge it nothing. It will be in very truth 'Your Father's House.'

Again, sometimes the 'law of the house' is the *law of mutual love*. You see this markedly in some homes. Is it the law of our family life? I wish I could feel it was more so. It does pain me when persons who have worshipped with us for years tell me they are strangers to all who have knelt by their side. I know the Church is not wise to interfere too far in social matters; but there is something higher than social custom. There is a Voice which cries to us - 'Sirs, ye are brethren!' When fellow-Christians kneel side by side, and yet never even a look of recognition is given, surely something is wrong. We need the voice of the Apostle of Love speaking to us as a Father - 'Little children love one another,'

Let me mention another 'law of the house.' I mean *spontaneous action*. It is an essential in family life. Nothing should be artificial, nothing forced - love, work, generosity, freely, gladly given. I will not say much upon this head. The giving power of the congregation has greatly developed, though it has always been, and is still, far too much in the hands of a few; the ordinary offertories show how many give to God what 'costs them nothing.' But there is great lack of *spontaneous action*. It arises, I believe, from thoughtlessness, from timidity, from a fear of putting

oneself forward, but it is a *real hindrance*. It is sometimes said to me that we are always asking for money at S. Mary's. I think those who say it lose sight of the fact that they are worshipping in a voluntary, disendowed church, that *must* ask more of its members. Certainly they forget the other alternative. If you are 'always asking,' my brethren, the remedy is in your own hands. *Give unasked*. Do you think it is pleasant for the clergy, for any Christian gentleman, to be always asking for money which they know can be given unasked, and in many cases without being missed; to be dependent on the help of friends outside the congregation for help to carry on their mission work, or else to see it fall away? There is no reason why money and work should not be forthcoming without any asking at all. You know your needs. You can ascertain from us at any time the cost of any branch of our parochial work. We ought not to have 'to leave the Word of God and to serve tables.'

One last feature, which may be the 'law of the house,' is the feature of *sympathy*. It filters down from the head. It is reflected all through the home. Brethren, let me assure you (some of you do not need the assurance), that for my part that sympathy is always ready. In the trials of your lives, in your intellectual difficulties, in your spiritual troubles, not because I claim superiority, intellectual or spiritual, over any one of you, but because I believe in my office - if I did not, should I be here speaking to you as I am speaking now? It is my joy, believe me, to rejoice when you rejoice; my privilege to weep when you weep. Only, it should be mutual. You owe us consideration, encouragement, sympathy. *You do not always give it*. There are some in every congregation keenly alive to the duty of the clergy towards themselves, not always pausing to consider what limits there must be to time and strength; but they do not stop to ask if it be *mutual*. Entreaties for workers, invitations to services, exhortations to more frequent communion, opportunities for joining guilds - all are treated by them with a calm, contemptuous indifference, as though they wished to impress upon us that they 'care for none of these things.' Do they think their clergy have no feelings, no hearts to feel, no sympathies to be wounded, no hopes to be disappointed? Are they, in their eyes, mere preaching machines to edify them once a week and lead their devotions, but to whom *they* owe no duty at all.

They claim more than human nature can give. They refuse the encouragement and the sympathy which human nature requires.

But, brethren, I am persuaded better things of you. From our mission congregations we do get encouragement. By their ready response even in such matters as contributing their money and their gifts of flowers to decorate God's House, they show their fondness for their Church, and make it an easy matter to work amongst them. And you do, some of you, many of you, give us encouragement also; but more might give it, and you might all give more. Believe me, no one is more conscious of the failure of a work than he who holds the reins of it. Cannot you perfect what is lacking in us? The call comes to all: on all the responsibility rests. The work is yours as much as ours. To laity as well as clergy the summons comes. Rise up, and obey it; live it out!

Fear not . . . Be strong, O Zerubbabel; and be strong, O Joshua, the sone of Josedech, the High Priest; and be strong, all ye people of the land, and work, for I am with you, saith the Lord of Hosts.