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Dublin's Dean

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JONATHAN SWIFT,
THE IRISH CHURCHMAN

BEING THE ANNUAL MEMORIAL DISCOURSE (SLIGHTLY
ABRIDGED) DELIVERED IN THE CHAPEL OF TRINITY
COLLEGE, DUBLIN, FOR 1940

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IT is in the character of Churchman and under the title of Dean that we are thinking of Jonathan Swift to-day.

He was a man of many parts, many titles, many characteristics. Few eighteenth-century characters can have had so many contradictory strains in their composition.

Jonathan Swift in his time revealed many facets to his personality and gained many assorted kinds of titles—"Poor Dear Foolish Rogue" by Stella; "The Drapier" by the Dublin Man-in-the-Street; "Gulliver" and "Bickerstaff" by his literary cronies in London; a man who "put his apostasy out to hire" by Thackeray; the pastor who "literally followed the steps of his Blessed Saviour and went about doing good" by Patrick Delaney, Fellow of this College.

It is as Doctor of Divinity, as Irish Churchman, as Pastor, Prophet and Priest, that we think of him to-day—and this was as real a side to Swift's nature as all the others. It is the happiest side—and it is the character for which he himself struggled against the odds of his own self-tortured soul.

It is not within the scope of this short discourse to attempt to unravel all the strands of Swift's tangled personality. It is not an easy undertaking, nor one particularly likely

to be successful, to attempt to psycho-analyse a man two hundred years dead.

But at least we can be sure of one thing—and the evidence does show it clearly—that ruling and guiding a tortured spirit and tortuous mind there was a very simple practical Christian creed, uncritically and faithfully believed and devoutly followed, which did bring forth its fruit of good works through that simplest and most powerful of means—prayer.

That Swift had a very real spiritual life and that he did believe in prayer is certain. Admittedly this knowledge is something which has to be dug painfully out of his life story. Many of his contemporaries looked upon him as an infidel and too few would have echoed Dick Steele's phrase and called him "a man of wisdom as well as piety." They can hardly be blamed, for Swift had the not uncommon psychological trait of being shy about showing off his religion. In its most extreme form persons like Swift often pretend to indifference, material-mindedness—a very unfortunate nervous twist for a clergyman.

But when we examine the matter more closely we find that Swift's daily prayers, quietly and regularly said in his bedchamber with his servants, were an essential part of his spiritual life. For some years before his death his last coherent words were an effort to continue his daily worship. His attendance at Holy Communion was regular and devoted, if unobtrusive. We are told, too, by Delaney, that he never missed the opportunity of celebrating the sacrament at St. Patrick's Cathedral, and that his transparent sincerity in that spiritual act was something particularly inspiring.

If we will, we can easily feel the sincerity of Swift's attitude towards the Holy Communion by reading between the lines of his scathing remark in the Journal to Stella:

"I was in early to see the Secretary, Bolingbroke, but he was gone to his devotions and to receive the sacraments; several rakes did the same. It was not for piety but for employment, according to Act of Parliament."

"Some people," wrote Swift, "take more care to hide their wisdom than their folly." It was certainly Swift's misfortune that he did so, and then he only shows us his greatest depths of spiritual feeling in moments of real need, at the sick beds of his friends, to reassure those who were

in trouble, or at Stella's death-bed, when his prayers reveal a very real spirit of faith.

I should like before passing on to quote Swift's customary pupil prayer :

"Almighty and most merciful God, forgive us all our sins. Give us grace heartily to repent them and to lead new lives. Graft in our hearts a true love and veneration of thy Holy Name and Word. Make thy pastors burning and shining lights, able to convince gainsayers and to save others and themselves. Bless this congregation here met together in thy name. Grant them to hear and receive thy Holy Word to the salvation of their own souls. Lastly, we desire to return Thee praise and thanksgiving for all Thy mercies bestowed upon us ; but chiefly for the fountain of them all, Jesus Christ our Lord."

It is essential to full understanding of Swift, to realize, once for all, that in his work as a clergyman of the Church of Ireland, he was not a hypocrite nor a mere ecclesiastical politician, but a sincere and hard working member of his order.

* * * * *

The time has now come to run through the more tangible part of Jonathan Swift's career as a clergyman. As we know, he was a Dubliner ; born in 1667 ; a child of unusual and somewhat unhappy upbringing ; an obscure and unsuccessful student of Trinity College, Dublin ; a back-secretary in a great house (the kind of position which entitled the chaplain to eat at the lowest place at the high table, but not to remain for dessert), and at last, in 1695, a parson in a parish of sorts.

This was Kilroot, a union of at least four derelict parishes in County Down, outlying and neglected, and as far as we can see, without any congregation.

The lot of the parson of this kind of parish was miserable in the extreme. It entailed poverty in a thatched cabin, and enforced exile from educated friends, no position worth mentioning. (A parson, "being only a gentleman by profession is inferior to him who is a gentleman by birth," as a pamphlet of 1700 says.) Swift's situation in Kilroot reminds one of that unfortunate curate who, a hundred years later,

" . . . on every Sabbath day
 Through eight long miles he took his way,
 To preach, to grumble and to pray ;
 To cheer the good, to warn the sinner,
 And, if he got it, eat a dinner.
 Thus were his weekly journeys made
 'Neath summer suns and wintry shade ;
 And all his gains it did appear,
 Were only thirty pounds a year."

Fortunately for Swift's sanity he soon deserted Kilroot in despair. The presbyterian bias of the district left him no scope for work and filled him with wrath.

His next benefice was the union of Laracor in the Diocese of Meath, to which he was appointed in February, 1700.

This quiet place was Swift's favourite haunt in Ireland, and his parish for 45 years. He remained incumbent all through his Deanery days, appointing a resident curate to do the duty during his absence in Dublin. What one likes about Swift's attitude towards Laracor was his refreshing and rather surprising willingness to enjoy simple things. His ability to make all his Laracor geese into swans. His mud-floored cottage and truckle-bed on "half an acre of Irish bog" meant as much to him as his imposing Deanery house in Dublin. The cherries were more luscious in his garden and the trout plumper in his stream at Laracor than anywhere else in the world. There he achieved that first essential of the clergyman's life—the loving of his people. They were a tiny handful; fifteen of them, "all gentle and most simple." His parish might have become an intolerable source of inertia, with its dozen and a quarter churchgoers, plus a lunatic shopkeeper and two overbearing landlords. But happily (and this must be placed to Swift's credit) the entire parish flourished. We read how Swift even attempted to hold weekday services on Wednesdays and Fridays, a rare enough undertaking in those days. We all know the sequel—"Dearly Beloved Roger, the Scripture moveth you and me"—but at least the effort was commendable. To do Swift justice as a country parson, we have only to contrast with the state of Laracor entry after entry in typical, early eighteenth-century Visitations. There are many—too many—notes such as the following by dispirited bishops

" Body of church fallen down ; Font has no pedestal ; Bible out of binding ; surplice thirty years old and mouldy ; churchyard slovenly ; curate non-resident deacon."

It was at this period of Swift's career that Archbishop King made the suggestion that Swift, " for his own interest as well as duty " might bring out a book on " some serious and theological subject," and to get for himself some fitting " station that may make a man easy and prevent contempt when he grows in years."

That was a suggestion which was definitely not adopted by Swift ! But despite his refusal, he certainly was not idle.

For in spite of the obscurity of his " hedge parish," it is ^{now} ~~it is~~ ^{became} obvious that Swift was already making himself known as one who would be a keen worker for the Church of Ireland. That is clear from the fact that in addition to their two official representatives (two English-born Irish bishops), the Convocation of the Church thought it advisable to entrust Swift with a kind of roving commission in Lavacor to secure the remission of the First Fruits and Twentieth Parts from Queen Anne.

X On her birthday, February 4th, 1704, Queen Anne had thought fit to mark her devotion for the Church of England by making a really munificent gift—the remission of two burdensome taxes on the clergy which had been annexed to the crown by Henry VIII. It meant that she abandoned her legal claim on the first year's income of all benefices, plus one tenth of all further stipends, and it produced in due course a capital sum of money which now pays to the clergy of the Church of England no less than one hundred and sixty thousand pounds annually.

Naturally the Church of Ireland was more than a little anxious to gain a similar concession, and Swift was appointed as their supplementary spokesman.

He entered energetically into this task. Indeed, it seems quite clear that Swift was sincerely in sympathy with all that religious revival movement which marked the reign of Queen Anne.

The opening of the eighteenth century was signposted by the foundation of those twin societies the S.P.G. and the S.P.C.K. Under the benevolent eye of " ~~Goody~~ Anne "—(a sadly under-estimated sovereign) sundry societies for the Reformation of Manners were founded in quick succession.

Dozens of old institutes were invoked to prosecute sabbath-breakers and swearers. The complaint was made, that "no one but a person of quality could safely swear in a public place." Floods of tracts filtered through the country; a pamphlet for hackney-coachmen entitled, "Kind Cautions against Sweating," was succeeded by a similar one for bargees entitled, "Kind Cautions for Watermen." The Irish Convocations of 1703 and 1709 entered into the movement with an effort to encourage teaching and preaching in the Irish tongue—an enterprise which unfortunately proved to be only a flash in the pan. Swift used his peculiar talents for satire to produce some excellent and scathing Church pamphlets, notably "An argument against abolishing Christianity," "A true and Faithful Narrative of what Passed in London" (1708) and "A Project for the Advancement of Religion" (1709).

Further, to Swift is due the scheme for building fifty new churches in London and Westminster—a plan which actually passed Parliament, secured a grant of £350,000, and resulted in at least a dozen much-needed church buildings in the city.

Among these edifices which owe their begetting to Swift's pen, and which still survive, are St. Mary-le-Strand, St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, and that peculiarly odd church of St. George's in Bloomsbury, which is crowned by a statue of King George I.

Jonathan Swift believed in Queen Anne—perhaps more than Anne believed in him! He went so far as to plan to make her the focal point of a great revival movement. Such is the scheme of his "Project for the Advancement of Religion." It might have come about as he had planned, but for her untimely death and the coming of a century of humpish Hanoverian inertia.

However, in the meantime he did succeed in securing for Ireland the remission of our own First Fruits and Twentieth Parts. It was a slow and humiliating task that he undertook; it meant hours of intrigue and waiting in the ante-chambers of the great; it made him sigh in the stuffiness of London for the willows and quicksets of Lavacor; but he held out to the bitter end, and he was rewarded by the signing and the sealing of the grant on February 7th, 1711.

In all surveys of Irish Church history this achievement of Swift's deserves kindly remembrance. It certainly

proved an inestimable boon in the early days of the nineteenth century when the call came for scores of new church buildings throughout our countryside.

After this exploit it was inconceivable that Swift should be left much longer in Laracor. Less able men, and men who had done no such service for their church had achieved the purple, including a whole horde of Lord Lieutenants' chaplains. But unfortunately for Swift, there was a barrier to promotion; the fact that Queen Anne and Archbishop Sharpe had read and had been shocked by "A Tale of a Tub." Reading it to-day, it is hard to blame them; it must be said that Swift's satire in this book exceeded all the limits of decency. But strangely enough Swift appears to have failed to understand Queen Anne's objection, and protested (quite sincerely and honestly) that the object of the tale was "to celebrate the Church of England as the most perfect of all others in discipline and doctrine," and that he would "forfeit his life if any one opinion could be fairly deduced from that book which was contrary to religion or morality."

To correct abuses was indeed the aim of all Swift's satirical writings (except for certain cases in which his own abnormal characteristics have obscured his vision). His intention was to chastise vice and to shame sin into repentance. Throughout his writings he is a prophet, with all the characteristically violent fire of the true prophetic line, whether it be Amos tilting at the "Kine of Bashan that are in the mountain of Samaria, which oppress the poor, which crush the needy," or John scourging a "generation of vipers," or the Dean himself flaying the oppressors of the peasant, and snarling, "I grant this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children." (A Modest Proposal.)

His cruel cutting satire was his usual method, as he confessed himself.

His main plan for reforming men seems first to have been the application of the cauterizing power of ridicule to make sin uncomfortable, and secondly the power of habit to make a constrained fondness eventually become second nature.

Lord Orrery expresses this aim clearly in his "Remarks":
"To correct vice, by showing its deformity in opposition

to the beauty of virtue ; and to amend the false systems of philosophy, by pointing out the errors ; and applying salutary means to avoid them, is a noble design. This was the general intent, I would fain flatter myself, of my hieroglyphic friend."

He was actuated in his satirical writings by a burning passion for justice and truth and by a hatred for selfishness, cruelty and wrong. That is the motive power of his Irish pamphlets rather than any kind of naturalistic ideology. But sheer humanity and Christian justice drove him to lash the oppressors of the Irish people with all the virulence of a bitter tongue. It was not in his nature to observe with complacency the contrast between what the Irish peasant was potentially—a cottager of "good sense, humour and raillery"—and what the Irish peasant had been made—"a wretch . . . forced to pay for a filthy cabin and two ridges of potatoes treble their worth," and "brought up to steal or beg for want of work." ("Maxims controlled in Ireland.")

It is time for us to return to Swift's ecclesiastical life. We left him securing the grant of the First Fruits for the Church of Ireland, and by way of reward he was appointed by warrant of April 23rd, 1713, to the Deanery of St. Patrick's.

In his clerical work he proved himself full of energy and enthusiasm, and his tireless work in Dublin raised the religious standard of the Cathedral out of all recognition.

The brief space available in this article allows of little but a cramped catalogue of some of Swift's activities during his thirty-two years of Deanship.

In the first place, he improved the quality of the services immeasurably. He restored the weekly Communion—for a century St. Patrick's was the only church in Dublin where this rule prevailed. He inaugurated a Sunday afternoon Evensong with sermon. He attended the French Huguenot service held in the Lady Chapel. He himself endeavoured to correct and train up young preachers. Dr. Delaney's account of Swift's method is quaint—how he pulled out pencil and paper when anyone got into the pulpit, "and carefully noted every wrong pronunciation or expression that fell from him. Whether too hard, or scholastic (and of consequence not sufficiently intelligible to a vulgar hearer), or such as he deemed in any degree improper, indecent, slovenly or mean ; and those he never failed to admonish

the preacher of as soon as he came into the Chapter House." To assist neophyte preachers he published an admirable treatise on the subject—a Letter to a Young Gentleman Lately Entered into Holy Orders. He himself was a careful and simple preacher, and if not a great orator by nature, he certainly succeeded in attracting his hearers, for on the fifth Sunday of the month when he preached in St. Patrick's, his congregation numbered not less than one thousand.

He drilled and dragooned a lazy, insubordinate choir, scoured England for new voices, and watched them and ruled them with a rod of iron, until at last he created that splendid body of vicars-choral which assisted Handel at the first production of the Messiah in 1742. Swift was not by nature musical, and those who doubt his religious sincerity may well be referred to that letter which he wrote to Lady Cateret on the use of music in the Divine Service: "For my own part, I would rather say my prayers without it. But as long as it is thought by the skilful, to contribute to the dignity of public worship, by the blessing of God it shall never be disgraced by me ; nor, I hope, by any of my successors."

It ought to be held to the credit of Swift's good taste that he did appreciate his great gothic church in Dublin. He was, perhaps, almost alone in his enlightened attitude in that age when Deans pulled down their mediaeval cathedrals, as in Waterford ; or stripped the roof off, as in Caspel, or let them fall down, as in Kildare ; or plastered them with cheap pseudo-classical ornament as in Limerick. Swift did none of these things, but worked hard and spent money lavishly to improve St. Patrick's.

Although (for almost the first time in history) Swift built up a credit balance in the economy fund, the receipt books of St. Patrick's are full of items which show his care and his desire for decency and order. For instance, during one year, 1736, the following list of improvements is recorded : Painting ; draining and cleaning of the Poddle sewer ; timber covering laid over the Poddle ; smith's work ; five brass clasps for Bibles ; repairing the bells ; mason's and carpenter's work ; carver's work done on the organ ; painting the church doors ; gilding and painting the choir ; glazing ; brasses for the tenor bell ; transcribing the choir books ;

a green bag for the chapter books ; taking down and cleaning the candelabra.

The list could go on without end—all kinds of improvements and additions innumerable were made by him through the thirty-two years of Deanship. Almost at random we note his preservation of ancient records and search for lost documents ; his planting of the churchyard with elm trees ; the bell, clock and fire engine which he provided ; his rebuilding of the organ ; the campaign to preserve and erect monuments.

When we consider how little needed to be done in those days by a Dean ; when we contrast the condition at the same period of Christ Church, Dublin, or St. Canice's, Kilkenny, which was reported as dilapidated, dirty, and having only one service a Sunday, we cannot help feeling that Swift's heart was in his work as a dignitary of the Church of Ireland.

But it is possible to be a good cathedral administrator and a brilliant writer of Christian propaganda without being a real pastor. Jonathan Swift was all three things. And as a slum parson, Swift was unsurpassed.

The Liberty of the Dean of St. Patrick's—the slum area around the Cathedral which was inhabited by the weavers of Dublin—was a notoriously lawless and poverty-stricken district. Around its narrow malodorous streets toiled Swift, the perfect “ walking parson,” “ absolute Monarch of the Liberties and King of the Mob,” as he said, idolized by his simple people, saluted by all, and conscientiously returning the bows of his parishioners until he wore out his hats before their time—he often said that the Liberties ought to pay him 40s. a year for wear and tear in beavers caused by acknowledging salutations !

His interest in these poor people was not solely a courtesy or a spiritual one. He worked indefatigably to foster their industries and to improve their business standards ; out of his own pocket he founded a system of loans to put struggling tradesmen in the way of earning a living ; he badged and organized and provided for the beggars ; he built an almshouse for widows at his own expense ; he started a charity school for boys ; he ministered daily to a long queue of human derelicts.

It is said that Swift gave not less than one-third of his

income in charity. The receipt books of St. Patrick's are full of entries like that of March, 1720—"Ordered that forty pounds be given to the poor weavers as their charity." His pockets were always filled with an assortment of coins to be distributed to his poorer people, and at every street corner lived one or other of the quaint old women whom he financed—"Stumpa-Nympha," without arms or legs; "Flora," who sold bunches of violets; Pullagouna, who plucked at his coat tails and begged for sixpence, and many another. "Here," said Dr. Delaney, Swift's friend and contemporary, "he literally followed the example of his blessed Saviour and went about doing good."
