

THE MINISTRY OF DEACONESSES

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The Ministry of Deaconesses by Deaconess Cecilia Robinson

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DEACONESS CECILIA ROBINSON

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BY

DEACONESS CECILIA ROBINSON

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
RANDALL T. DAVIDSON, D.D.
LORD BISHOP OF WINCHESTER

AND AN APPENDIX BY
J. ARMITAGE ROBINSON, D.D.
HARRISIAN PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY

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1898

TO
ISABELLA GILMORE
HEAD DEACONESS OF THE DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER
FROM WHOM MANY HAVE LEARNT
TO UNDERSTAND AND TO DESIRE
THE OFFICE AND WORK OF A DEACONESS

INTRODUCTION

I T is a privilege to accede to the request that I should write something by way of Introduction to this little book. Yet I scarcely think an Introduction is required. It is in truth a book which has for some years past been wanted. Articles and speeches and Church Congress papers and the like have presented the subject from many points of view during the last quarter of a century, but since the publication of Dean Howson's volume on 'Deaconesses,' in 1862, there has, so far as I know, been no serious endeavour to deal consecutively with the early history of the Order, and with its modern revival in the Church of England. The occasion is now ripe. The organised work of women in the Church has of late advanced by leaps and bounds, and the

'apologetic audacity' of Dean Howson's words, as he discusses what women may and may not do, reads to-day like the utterance of some distant age. Yet the Deaconess life for which he pleaded with persistent earnestness has advanced in the English Church with slow and halting steps, while Sisterhoods, to our inestimable gain, have multiplied and spread on every side. In at least one Chapter of this book an attempt is incidentally made to explain the anomaly.¹ In my judgment it is mainly due to the ignorance and misunderstanding prevalent among all sorts and conditions of men and women as to the history, and consequently as to the distinctive character and dignity, of Deaconess life. The subject, so far as it concerns the primitive Church, is admittedly difficult and obscure, and our endeavour to return—mutatis mutandis—to the principles and rules of the early centuries has been retarded and confused by the contemporary growth, both within and without

¹ See Chapter IX.

our Communion, of a great body of Christian workers who adopted some fifty years ago the then unused title of 'Deaconess,' without thereby claiming any position in the Church similar to that which belonged to the Deaconess of early days.¹ The work of these devoted women, both in Germany and England, is beyond praise, nor can they be blamed for having utilised an ancient title for which, when they adopted it, there were apparently no rival claimants in the ordered system of the Church of England. The title, however, is one which in the modern revival of Church life we cannot spare. It is our distinctive privilege in the Church of England to go back wherever we can to the usages and the example of the Church of early days. What we have lacked in recent years has been a book which should present in simple form, to the average English reader, such a picture of the Deaconess and her work as can be traced in the grey

¹ See Report of Committee of Lambeth Conference, 1897, *infra* p. 220.

twilight of those far off years, and should further describe from personal knowledge the revival in our own day, both in England and America, of that selfsame work upon the selfsame lines. Obviously the qualifications needed for this double task are so different as to make it in the highest degree unlikely that we should find them combined, and it is precisely that combination which gives to this little volume its distinctive value. An English Deaconess, equipped in no ordinary degree by training, experience, and mental power, has devoted herself, in a period of enforced leisure, to this labour of love; and her brother, a profound student of patristic and liturgical literature and history, lends to her earlier chapters the unquestioned weight of his authority and the aid of his original research. It would be presumptuous to say that in a little book like this the ground has been covered, or the debateable questions solved, but those who are familiar with what has already been written on the

subject will, I believe, be the first to recognise the value of this new contribution to its serious and sympathetic consideration. With all my heart do I wish it God-speed.

Of the great place which Deaconess life will take hereafter in the Church of England I have myself no doubt whatever. The principles on which it rests are so sound, so reasonable, so Scriptural and Apostolic, and accord so truly with the character of our English Church, that, once rightly understood, they are bound to win their way and to bear fruit. Though the harvest tarry it will come at length.

It has been my privilege in two Dioceses to have under me a band of trained and faithful women bearing the sacred commission of the Diaconate, and there is literally no part of the work in either Diocese which seems to me to have a nobler promise or to be more capable of fruitful expansion in the coming years. If the progress is curiously slow, it is, for that very reason, the more sure. The