

CONVERSATION S ON RITUALISM

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Conversations on Ritualism by Charles Woodruff Rankin

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CHARLES WOODRUFF RANKIN

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By Charles Woodruff Ranvier.



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Conversations on Ritualism.

CONVERSATION I.

Rector. — Good-morning, Mr. Brown: you see that I am waiting for you. I received the note you considerably sent to me, informing me of your wish to have some conversation on the subject of Ritualism, and I have kept myself disengaged that we might talk the matter over at our leisure.

Parishioner. — I am obliged to you, Mr. Wilson. I have been very much troubled at some things that I have seen and heard; and remembering how after you have told us that we ought to go to our clergyman for instruction on matters that we did not understand, I took the liberty of writing the note to which you have referred.

Rec. — You acted wisely; I wish that you would always do so. It is too often the case that persons form hasty opinions on matters that they have not looked into; or else take up the crudely formed opinions of other people; or, what is worse still, allow prejudice to influence them in matters of very grave importance, when, if they would only look into such subjects carefully and thoughtfully, or seek information from those who are familiar with them, they would save themselves and their clergyman a great deal of trouble, and perhaps obtain a deeper insight into spiritual truths than they have ever had.

Par. — True. I well remember the relief it was to my mind to hear you explain, as you did to me in private, the

sense in which you so often use the word Catholic. Before that explanation I had always supposed that Catholicism meant Romanism; but when you pointed out to me that the peculiarities of the Roman Church were really violations of true Catholicism, and that instead of being really Catholic, she is only a part of the Catholic Church, and a very imperfect and corrupt part too, it removed many difficulties from my mind, and I now enjoy and glory in a word which I used to shrink from whenever I heard it used.

Rec. — I am glad to hear it; let us hope that something of the same kind will result from the candid inquiry you have made concerning Ritualism. I wish you would state to me just what your difficulties are.

Par. — Well, I hardly know how to go about it. I thought before I came to you that I had arranged all I wished to say in a very systematic order, but I really find it difficult to express my ideas clearly on the subject.

Rec. — May it not be that you have not got any very clear ideas on the subject; and that possibly you have become agitated and disturbed without any real cause? I have often known this to be the case in very grave and important matters.

Par. — It may be so. The truth is I have heard so much about Ritualism that I am sick of the word. I can hardly take up a paper in which I do not find something about Ritualism; if I make a call upon a neighbor, I am sure to hear Ritualism brought up. Last Sunday Mr. ——— preached a furious sermon against Ritualism, and now I see that some sort of a declaration has appeared from some of the bishops on the subject, so that I am getting bewildered and perplexed. I really do want to know what the word means, and what is the reason of all this uproar which seems so suddenly to have burst upon us.

Rec. — Well, I do not wonder, for if ever there were an illustration of the old saying of a "great cry and little wool," I think we have it here. The whole Church seems

to be wide awake for once, and even some of the bishops to have been frightened from their propriety, because one little church in the city of New York has introduced some usages to which they are not accustomed, and our Presiding Bishop has written a little work which presents some truths with which they are not familiar.

Par. — You refer to St. Alban's Church, do you not?

Rec. — I do.

Par. — Have you ever been there?

Rec. — Yes, twice.

Par. — What did you think of the services?

Rec. — I was pleased with some things; though there were some points which seemed to me to be open to exception; but if we go into details of the services at St. Alban's, we will be diverted from a more satisfactory examination of the subject on which you ask for information.

Par. — Excuse me, but I would like to ask a question about this church. Is it not in the Diocese of New York?

Rec. — It is.

Par. — I observe that the Bishop of New York does not appear among the signers of this declaration against Ritualism. Is it not singular that twenty-eight Bishops should unite in a remonstrance against usages which do not obtain in their own dioceses, and only in a single church in a single diocese, and that the Bishop of that diocese is on the spot to interfere, in case there should be any serious infraction of the Church's law?

Rec. — You ask some very grave questions. I cannot undertake to answer them all, or any of them very fully, but I will tell you what I think. I think that these twenty-eight Bishops ought to have read what St. Peter says in his 1st Epistle (chap. 4, verse 15) before signing that paper. Our version of the passage is: "*Let none of you suffer as a . . . busybody in other men's matters;*" and if they had taken the trouble to read the original Greek they would have found it peculiarly applicable to themselves; for St.

Peter is speaking of Episcopizing it in the affairs of other people, or, as Canon Wordsworth gives it, — “One who sets himself up as an overseer or censor of what belongs to others; a judge of other men’s servants.” One would think that our bishops have enough to do in their own dioceses, without meddling with those of their Episcopal brethren.

Par. — Surely they must have forgotten themselves; but will you tell me what importance is to be attached to this declaration?

Rec. — It has no authority whatever. It has no canonical weight. It is not law, neither is it any interpretation of law.

Par. — You surprise me. Pray explain your meaning more fully.

Rec. — The only way in which our bishops can act except as the Ordinaries of their respective dioceses, is in their united, corporate, collegiate character as a *House of Bishops*. Even here they can only express opinions: they cannot define doctrines or make laws. The laws or canons of the Church can only be made by the General Convention, and you know that the House of Bishops is only one part of the General Convention. This declaration of the “twenty-eight” is not the action of the law-making power of the Church; neither is it an authoritative expression of opinion on the subject of which it treats. It is simply a declaration of the individual opinions of the signers. So far as the secret history of it is known, it lacks the dignity which their *concurrent* action would have given to it, for it seems to have gone circulating around the country, begging for signers, and failing to secure the names of some of those who are confessedly the most learned of our prelates.

Par. — What weight then should it have with those who wish to be informed upon this matter?

Rec. — Simply so much as would be given to the opinions of as many other men; and the value of their opinions

would be measured by their knowledge of the subject. It is pretty well understood that but few of our bishops or clergy are well informed with regard to Ritualism, it not having entered very largely into the course of their theological studies; and the low, loose, and irregular usages tolerated in some of our dioceses, show that their practice is on the same level with their learning.

Par. — Well, I am greatly relieved. I was really fearful that some terrible evil was impending over the Church; but it seems to me that the greatest evil is that so many of our bishops could be found who would forget the limits of their Episcopal authority. But you have not told me why the Bishop of New York has not interfered to put down the services at St. Alban's, if they are, as is alleged, in violation of the Church's laws.

Rec. — Well, really, I hardly know how to answer you. I am not in Bishop Potter's confidence; indeed I have but the slightest acquaintance with him; but again I will tell you what I think. The Bishop has the character of being a prudent man; certainly he is familiar with the Scriptures, and he may have read therein something of this kind: "And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it, lest haply ye be found even to fight against God." Acts v. 38, 39.

Par. — But stop; was it not Gamaliel, a Pharisee, a doctor of the Jewish law, who gave that counsel, and are we not cautioned very earnestly against Judaizing?

Rec. — True, my friend, but we may sometimes take lessons in common sense as well as in Ritualism, by looking into the old Jewish Church; there is more to be learned there than many of us moderns wot of.

Par. — But still you have not answered one of my questions, Why, if the usages referred to be in violation of law, are they not interdicted?

Rec. — May it not be that they are *not* violations of law? May it not be that there is no law in the Church in this country, of which they *can* be violations?

Par. — You surprise me! no law prescribing such important matters as are involved in this discussion!

Rec. — Suppose you examine your Prayer-book and the Canons of the Church, and satisfy yourself upon this matter. You will find in the latter something about candidates for Holy Orders who are lay-readers not assuming the dress appropriate to clergymen; and in the former, you will find a direction for those who are about to be ordained deacons or priests being “decently habited;” and in the Form for the Consecration of Bishops you will find it ordered that the elected bishop must be vested with his rochet, and at a certain part of the service, the bishop elect shall “put on the rest of the Episcopal habit;” but if you can find any thing more than this; if you can find any direction as to what is meant by being “decently habited,” or by the rest of “the Episcopal habit,” you will greatly oblige me by pointing it out.

Par. — Is it so, then, that there is no written law of our Church on this subject?

Rec. — Even so; whether for evil or for good, even so; *I think for good.*

Par. — But is there not usage, which becomes a kind of common law to the Church?

Rec. — Again you touch on tender ground. The twenty-eight Bishops go back to the date of the American Revolution, and the introduction of a resident Episcopate in this Church, as the period to whose usages, &c., we must conform ourselves, and yet I doubt if there are a dozen churches in the country where the order of divine service is not in advance of what then obtained; indeed if the subject were not so serious, I can hardly imagine a more amusing scene than the effort to frame our services according to *that* standard; there are not many parishes even