

**ON THE RITE OF CONSECRATION  
OF CHURCHES,  
ESPECIALLY IN THE CHURCH OF  
ENGLAND: A LECTURE**

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On the rite of consecration of churches, especially in the Church of England: a lecture by John Wordsworth

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**JOHN WORDSWORTH**

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—+—  
*Introduction.*

My interest in the subject to which I have the privilege to call the attention of the Church Historical Society is naturally in great measure one of a practical character. Being called as a Bishop to consecrate Churches, some of them of considerable importance, and finding myself without authoritative direction as to the rite to be followed, I have almost inevitably had to consider what history might suggest on the subject. Two occasions especially have stimulated this inquiry, the consecration of Marlborough College Chapel, on Michaelmas Day, 1886, and that of the Collegiate Church of St. George at Jerusalem, on St. Luke's Day, 1898, from which I have recently returned. Both opportunities have been used by me for the Revision of the current *Form and Order* which has come down to us from the beginning of the last century, the first revision for general Diocesan use being published in 1887, the second in the present year (1898). The latter, I may remark, was used for the first time a few weeks before my journey to Jerusalem, at the consecration of the beautiful new Church built by Viscount Portman at his Dorset home in the parish of Bryanston. Our Sarum form differs from all others that I have as yet seen in containing certain appropriate music, which I owe to the kindness of Precentor Carpenter and Mr. W. S. Bambridge, organist of Marlborough College, for which part of it was composed in 1886. In these revisions I have had the assistance of able liturgists, amongst

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whom I may especially name Dr. W. Bright, of Christ Church, Oxford, Mr. Brightman, of the Pusey House, Mr. Charles Druitt, Vicar of Whitchurch Canonorum, and my brother, Christopher Wordsworth, now Rector of S. Peter's, Marlborough. The final responsibility, however, has rested solely with myself.

It is mainly with the view of setting before you the principles on which this revision seems to me to rest, and of encouraging a like revision in other Dioceses (which may some day, I hope, lead to the adoption of a worthy and truly characteristic rite by the Church of England as a body) that I have gladly accepted the offer made to me through your Chairman. He has, I may remark, himself studied the subject, and given me assistance in preparing this lecture by communicating to me the contents of the important collection of consecration forms at Lambeth.

I. It is not easy to determine what were the first rites and ceremonies in use when buildings for Christian worship were set apart for the service of God. Nor even when we come to the important historical dedications of the reign of Constantine the Great, in the early part of the fourth century, are we able to discern much light in the vague and inflated descriptions of Eusebius. The probability seems to be that the only essentials were a transference of previous ownership on the part of the Founder, and an acceptance of the trust by the Bishop of the Diocese on behalf of the Church, followed by a *solemn celebration of the Holy Eucharist*. The part played by the Founder or Builder would in accordance with Jewish and heathen precedent be a considerable one; and Christian custom, acting in accordance with the principles of Roman law, would prescribe the dedication by solemn and ceremonial use. The "usurpatio juris" of the Christian Society in its new home could hardly be otherwise exemplified than by the Sacrament in which believers, gathered under the presidency of their chief pastor, came together to meet their Lord in His new house, to plead His sacrifice and to feast upon it. Of course, the mere celebration of Christian mysteries in a place could not consecrate it, as Synesius remarks in a letter (Ep. 67) quoted by Bingham; nor could a consecration take place except with the full consent, formally expressed, of the previous owner of the site and building. Hence we find S. Athanasius apologizing at length to the Emperor Constantius for using a church founded by him, before its consecration, owing to the press of worshippers, and expressing a hope



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that he would come and assist at the ceremony of its dedication (*Apologia ad Constantium*, 14-18, an important passage). But, supposing the necessary conditions, it would seem that the solemn Eucharist was the only essential ceremony. It is worth noting in this connexion that the words *κυριακόν* and "Dominicum" are used both in Greek and Latin for the Lord's House or Temple and the Lord's Supper or Sacrifice<sup>1</sup>. The Eucharist is in fact the most distinctly Christian rite, that which proves a Church to be a Church. The Baptistry or Font may be and often is outside; but the holy Table can be no where but in the most prominent place of the Sanctuary.

I therefore agree in this point with that learned French professor, the Abbé Duchesne, whom I am glad to be able to count as a friend, who in his well-known book on the "origins of Christian worship" expresses himself to the following effect:—Towards the middle of the sixth century when Pope Vigilius wrote to Profuturus of Braga A. D. 538 "the Church of Rome had no ritual for the dedication of Churches. A Church was dedicated merely by the fact that Mass had been solemnly celebrated in it" (*Origines du culte Chrétien*, p. 389, 1889). A reminiscence of this ancient principle is found surely in the provision of Canon Law, attributed, no doubt falsely, to two different early popes, but probably embodying ancient tradition:—"Omnes basilicae cum missa debent semper consecrari." "All basilicas (apparently churches of all kinds) must always be consecrated with the celebration of a mass" (see Burchardus, iii. *decret.* 27, 21, as from Evarestus A. D. 96 and Gratian *de consecr.* dist. 1, c. 3, as from Hyginus A. D. 138). Of similar effect is the prohibition, adopted by various authorities, and sometimes ascribed to Pope Sylvester (A. D. 324) "Nullus Presbyter missas celebrare praesumat nisi in sacratis ab episcopo locis<sup>2</sup>."

The ascription of these canons to early popes is mere guess-work, or worse; but they seem to represent the expressed principles of the Church as early as the ninth century, and probably go back in substance to a remote antiquity.

<sup>1</sup> See Suicer s. v. *κυριακόν* for instances of both. S. Athanasius, writing to Constantius, speaks of his new Church at Alexandria, and takes for granted that he would wish the people to pray for him, *ἐν τῷ ἐκωνίμῳ σου τόπῳ ἢν ἦδη, μᾶλλον δὲ καὶ ἔμα τῷ θεμελίῳ, κυριακὸν πάντες ὀνομάζουσιν*. For "Dominicum" in both senses see S. Cyprian, *de op. et elem.* 15, cp. Ep. 63, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Gratian, l. c. cap. 15; cp. cap. 12.

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Whatever be the origin of these rules, there is no doubt that when Bishops of the Church of England began again to consecrate churches in the reign of King James I, they generally accepted the pre-reformation tradition on this point by making a celebration of Holy Communion an integral part of the rite. We find it in the forms used by Bishop Barlow of Lincoln in 1610, Bishop Andrewes in 1620, Bishop George Montaigne of London in 1622, Bishop William Laud of London on several occasions, 1630-1632, Bishop White of Ely at Peterhouse, 1632, Bishop Theophilus Field of Hereford at Abbey Dore in 1634, Archbishop Neile of York at Leeds, 1634, Bishop Cosin of Durham after the Restoration 1665, and the Irish form of 1666 onwards. It is clearly implied in the forms which were drawn up but left unfinished by Convocation in 1712 and 1715, and which, of course, never received Royal Assent, but have more currency than any others. The only seeming exceptions known to me in the seventeenth century are two rather obscure cases of consecrations by Bishop King of London and Bishop Moreton of Chester in 1615 and 1616, very shortly described by Collier (*Hist.* ii. 709). He gives only the Consecration prayer, and says: "After this a Psalm was sung and the Bishop dismissed the Congregation with his blessing." The prayer might come at the end of a celebration, or, what is still more probable, the Bishop dismissed the mass of the people with an intermediate blessing, and then went on with the communion for those who remained. Bishop King's register contains notes of the consecrations of St. Olave's, Silver Street, in 1610 and of the Chapel of Lord Bridgwater in Willoughby House in 1620, but (according to Dr. J. Wickham Legg, who has kindly made the search for me) no liturgical forms are given. There is a form of consecrating St. Sepulchre's Churchyard in 1612.

As regards opinion on the point of the celebration of the Eucharist the only one known to me is that of Bishop Gibson in his *Codex* (p. 189), who after quoting the maxim of the Canon Law: "Omnes basilicae cum missa debent semper consecrari," adds: "The gloss makes a doubt whether this is not *de substantia Consecrationis*: but be that as it will, it is certainly very decent." Had he inquired a little more deeply into the matter he could perhaps have spoken even more strongly. His own form, used in 1729 at Christ Church, in the Parish of St. Dunstan, Stepney, may be seen, with a number of others, in Oughton's *Ordo Judiciorum*

## I. EUCHARIST ORDERED IN THE XVIIIth CENTURY. 9

(2 p. 256 foll.), which shows that he followed the form of 1715 in this point. See also his *Codex*, ii. 1459-62.

I have examined a number of the Registers of my predecessors in the Diocese of Salisbury, and find the same usage on the point in question, though I cannot claim to have exhausted every instance. Nor can I venture to state when it became a matter of question whether the administration of the Lord's Supper should take place or not. But, I think, I may say with confidence that when the change was made in any diocese it was first made in the form of the half measure of stopping after the sermon or after the prayer for the Church. The special Collect, Epistle, and Gospel were always used. This process is illustrated by the form of Consecration adopted by the Church of the United States of America, the first branch of our communion to make such a form authoritative, which it did in 1799. The form is nearly that of 1715, but with some slight alterations, and the addition of a post-communion collect from the form of 1712. But it treats the celebration as uncertain: *The Sermon being ended the Bishop shall proceed in the service for the Communion, if it is to be administered at that time.* It is interesting, however, to note that the rubrics dealing with this contingency have been removed at the last revision of the American Prayer Book in 1886, and, as the service now stands, the Communion is taken for granted. The opening rubric simply is: *The Bishop shall then proceed to the Communion service, and at the end, For the last collect immediately before the final Blessing, the Bishop shall say this Prayer: Blessed be Thy Name, &c.*

The procedure of the modern Irish Church is even more explicit. The rubric is as follows:—*Communion service. The Bishop shall read the service, and the Holy Communion shall be administered, and then follow special Collect, Epistle, and Gospel, and two final or post-communion Collects.*

The uncertainty with regard to the celebration is reflected in the reprint of the current Form, edited by the much-respected Archdeacon of Oxford, Rev. C. C. Clerke, in 1833, and often reprinted afterwards, in the following rubric: *The sermon being ended, if there be no Communion, the Prayer for the Church militant shall be read.* It was, however, the practice of Bishop Samuel Wilberforce to have the celebration, as I learn from his son, the present Bishop of Chichester; and it is prescribed in the Diocesan *Form* of 1864.

It was not strange that in the early part of this century, and in