

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

### ORDER IN THE PROCESSION

*From The Very Revd. H. E. C. Stapleton*

Dear Sir,

With the increasing informality of worship there has been in recent years an erosion of the dignity and order of ceremonial which is surely a particular feature of the Church of England. Indeed, that order still abides in Cathedrals but it is found more rarely now in Parish Churches. In fact it is more frequently obvious on Civic and University occasions.

The procession is a particular case in point. For example, the institution of a priest into a living is an occasion when many clergy gather together. The congregation enter the church informally; the clergy formally in procession. But sadly this often is no longer part of the act of worship having degenerated into an opportunity for the exchange of gossip. Time was when the vestry prayer ruled silence but this rarely applies today. There is not only the disorderliness of chatter but the confusion in the ordering of the procession. The dignity and order of the Bishop and Archdeacon's procession are carefully set out on the institution paper but the rest of the clergy are all jumbled up together. This article is not a plea for the exaltation of the decanal status but a plea for priority and order in processions.

Propriety would suggest that for a normal service the procession enters in this order:

Choir  
 Readers  
 Non-Anglican Clergy  
 Deacons  
 Clergy - Curates/Incumbents  
 Rural Deans  
 Honorary Canons  
 Residentiary Canons  
 Incumbent  
 Archdeacon or Dean  
 Bishop

There can be further variations within these groups by placing clergy in order of ordination, differentiating incumbents and assistant curates for example. Cases have been known where the incumbent usurps the Archdeacon or Dean!

However, a real reason for pitching and shoving can be the respective positions of the Dean and the Archdeacon. In a Cathedral it is quite clear that the Dean has precedence except when the Bishop is present. A Suffragan Bishop who is an Honorary Canon enters at the rear of his fellow Canons. If, however, he is taking the place of the Diocesan Bishop he may by grace take up the rear. But where is the Suffragan's place when he has got no stall?

In a Cathedral there is no question other than that the Archdeacon is 'inferior' to the Dean. But opinions vary as to precedence in the diocese. In Nelson's *Rights of the Clergy 1732* the author corrects the misapprehension that it is the Archdeacon who has the precedence throughout the whole diocese. 'For if he (the Dean) is next in degree to the Bishop, and *the Head of the Chapter*, as certainly he is, his Authority must necessarily extend throughout the whole Diocese.' pp 272, 273.

Cripps too in *The Rights and Duties etc of Ecclesiastical Persons 1886* makes the point that a Dean is *arch presbyter*, chief priest, while an Archdeacon is *archidiaconal* only.

On the other hand in Phillimore's *Ecclesiastical Law* section 496 it is stated that the Archdeacon is 'next after the Bishop over a portion of a Diocese called an archdeaconry in matters ecclesiastical.' In a footnote Phillimore lists a number of references in law as to the respective superiority of Dean and Archdeacon. Some doubt as to whether the Archdeacon was in fact a 'dignitary' has been corrected by the Church Dignitaries (Retirement) Measure, 1949.

There would appear therefore to be some uncertainty about the legal situation. In practice the Archdeacon generally has priority in the Diocese, the Dean in the Cathedral. Indeed whatever the legal background it is a shame the Dean and Archdeacon may come to blows as to their place in a procession. The Dean has precedence in his own Cathedral, it is but gracious to yield to the Archdeacon in his own archdeaconry. However, if the Dean meets up with an Archdeacon in another archdeaconry, does the Dean have precedence?

If the Dean is the Senior Priest, the arch presbyter, then he and his Chapter, Residentiary and Honorary Canons possess a 'dignity' which differs from that of the generality of the clergy. Hence they should be at the end of a clergy procession.

If the Cathedral is to be seen as the Bishop's Church, then the Dean is part of the Bishop's *familia*; he should enter at the end of the clergy procession and sit in the sanctuary opposite the Archdeacon. A Bishop has recently ruled that at the end of an Institution service the Dean should go out behind the new incumbent, the Archdeacon following him.

The purpose of this letter is not to inflate the ego of the Dean. We are in a situation where a learned lawyer said 'You pays your money and takes your choice.' Most clergy have nowadays no idea of what is meant by order in the procession. This is a plea rather that all things may be done 'decently and in order.'

Yours faithfully,

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