

Eminent English Churchmen By the Reverend Canon Arthur Middleton

Thomas Wilson (1663-1755).

THOMAS WILSON, a bishop of truly apostolic integrity, was born at Burton, in Cheshire, December 20, 1663, and educated at the King's School, Chester and Trinity College, Dublin, where he was elected scholar in 1683. His first studied medicine, but his friend and fellow-student Michael Hewetson persuaded him to be ordained. In 1687 he served his title at Winwick in Lancashire where his uncle, Richard Sherlock, was rector, with a reputation as a fine parish priest of great ability and culture. In 1692 Wilson became domestic chaplain to the ninth Earl of Derby, tutor to his only son, and Master of the Almshouse at Lathorn, with a stipend of £50 a year. The earl also offered him the prosperous living of Badsworth, in the West Riding of Yorkshire, but Wilson refused the offer because he had resolved never to be a non-resident incumbent. The young priest was always ready to caution the Earl when he was wrong and the Earl respected him for this, and in 1697 claimed Wilson forced him into becoming Bishop of Sodor and Man, which was in his gift as Lord of Man. Again he offered him Badsworth in plurality to subsidise his stipend, but Wilson again refused.

His unique Episcopal ministry began in January, 1697-8 and lasted for more than fifty years and was appreciated and commended by all right-thinking people. Unlike England the bishop was not hampered by any of those impediments which, while nominally safeguards, were in reality obstacles to the Church's usefulness in England in the eighteenth century. In the Isle of Man there was no silencing of the voice of Convocation, no Act of Uniformity to prevent the Church from adapting itself to new needs and altered circumstances, no objections to the enforcement of a godly discipline. The Bishop had a free hand, and was able to make his Convocation a reality and, being a thoroughly well-instructed as well as earnest Churchman, defined its functions clearly and correctly before discharging them. Services were authorised for special occasions and he enforced the most rigorous discipline.

Priorities

Free from involvement in the royal court he devoted his whole time to his diocese, and rarely left the island. The secret to the Church's renewal was a renewed clergy, because the character of a Church depends greatly upon the character of its priests. His first priority was to them, especially to ordinands. Annually at his Convocation he listed the names of those seeking ordination

to the assembled clergy for their approval, and begged them to keep a watchful eye upon the candidates, so that when they had to sign their testimonials they might do it with a safe conscience. The ordinands themselves lived with the bishop and his family for a year before ordination, and each day he would read the Greek Testament with them. Episcopal visitations to parishes was by surprise because he knew that before the bishop's visit a parish is put in order, often giving a false impression of parish life. Surprise visits enabled him to judge for himself the state of parish life.

Education was the next priority. He established parochial schools throughout his diocese, long before they were common in England and impressed upon the clergy their duty in this matter. Dr. Bray's scheme for establishing parochial libraries was successful in the Isle of Man because of the Bishop's own efforts. He learned the Manx language, so that he could write and speak to the people in their own language and the result was that ordinary people bought the Bishop's publications.

Wilson's pastoral concern was the health of the whole person. His used his medical knowledge for the benefit of his people and opened a dispensary to give free advice and medicine. For some time he was the only physician on the island but when others came he surrendered to them the patients who could afford to pay and kept, as his own those who could not. He encouraged agriculture, planted trees, and set up "factories" to provide employment rather than merely relieve idleness.

Charitable Giving

He had always kept what he called "the poor drawer in his bureau, devoting first a tenth, then a third, then a half of his income to charitable purposes. To this he added "a poor's chest" in his barn which he always kept full of corn and meal for the destitute. He also purchased assortments of spectacles for the elderly poor, to enable them to read their Bibles when their eyesight was failing. An excellent businessman, Wilson's thrift promoted thrift in others and enabled him to do ten times more in the way of charity than many who had ten times his income. His example attracted to him likeminded friends and stimulated the Manxmen to take their share in the expenses, which his many schemes for good must have cost.

Primitive Discipline

The most significant feature in Wilson's episcopate was his success in restoring in the Isle of Man that primitive discipline which had long been non-existent, and elsewhere still is. He drew up a code of "Ecclesiastical Constitutions" for his diocese, in reference to which Lord Chancellor King said, "If the ancient discipline of the Church were lost, it might be found in

all its purity in the Isle of Man.” He was a severe disciplinarian, and drew the reins more tightly than even he could have done elsewhere. The rigorous system worked well and smoothly, and was patiently submitted to until the year 1713.

A new Governor, Alexander Horne, and a new Archdeacon, Robert Horobin, the Governor’s chaplain, arrived on the island. The harmony between the civil and ecclesiastical powers was disturbed. Difficulties arose, and resulted in the Bishop refusing to pay a fine imposed by the civil power. He was imprisoned for two months but public sympathy was on the side of the Bishop and, but for the mediation of Wilson personally himself, the people would have mobbed and destroyed the Governor’s house. They gathered around the prison and the Bishop preached to them from between the bars of his cell and he said that his diocese was never better governed than when he was in prison, and that, but for his health’s sake, he would have been content to live in prison all his life. His health suffered, and on that account, and also in the interest of justice, he felt it his duty, to appeal to the King in council, who reversed the judgement, and released him.

To compensate him for his expenses the King offered him the bishopric of Exeter, which he declined. He had previously (1711) declined a similar offer from Queen Anne, who was pleased with “the elegant simplicity” of a sermon he preached before her, and who had heard of his high character and the noble work he was doing in the Isle. Wilson replied that “by the blessing of God he could do some little good in the little spot that he then resided on; whereas, if he were removed into a larger sphere, he might be lost, and forget his duty to his flock and to his God.” When he visited England for the last time, in 1735, again an English bishopric was pressed upon him by Queen Caroline, to whom he made the oft-quoted reply, “No, an please your Majesty I will not leave my wife in my old age because she is poor.” So he returned to his island diocese, which had the privilege of his ministrations for twenty years longer, when he died, leaving behind him a name to which it would be hard to find an equal in any age or any part of the Church.

Writings

His writings fill several volumes in the Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology, and are a faithful transcript of the man. His *Sermons*, *his Maxims*, and his *Sacra Privata*, which is his book of private devotions, are still living, and still valued. “There is in them a happy mixture of quaint simplicity and homeliness combined with great thoughtfulness, of tenderness combined with manliness, of intense earnestness combined with an entire freedom from cant, which render them very fascinating. Possibly admiration of the man may lead one to exaggerate the merits of the writer and it is not surely

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unreasonable that “truth from his *Pen*” should “prevail with double sway
who led such a life as the saintly Thomas Wilson.”