

Reminiscences about the Beginnings of The Liberal Catholic Church

Report of an Address given to a group of Priests at “Crendon” [Sydney, Australia]

By the Rt. Rev. C. W. Leadbeater, 26th December, 1919¹



Bishops Wedgwood and Leadbeater in Sydney, 1921

For one thing I daresay many of you know that there have been rumours going on attacking the character of our Presiding Bishop for quite a long time. I suppose it is a couple of years ago since I first heard some such rumour; it is certainly some time ago since first people began to talk. Well, I have never heard any precise accusation formulated against him, but in a general sort of way the charges which were being rumoured as existing against him were very much the same as were made against me in 1906. He is supposed to have been altogether too familiar with a variety of young men and so on.

Possibly I had better say what I know about the Presiding Bishop to begin with; not that that has any direct bearing upon the case but it will give you a general idea of how I feel about it all. The first time I remember him to distinguish him was in that very same year, 1906. He arrived at Hodson-Smith's house at Harrogate where I was staying, coming to see me at the very time that I was arranging with Colonel Olcott to resign from the Society lest the charges brought against me should reflect upon it. He came on a walking tour with two other friends and asked to see me. I said to them: “You are coming to see me as a Theosophist, but I ought to warn you that I shall cease to be a member of the Society in a day or two”. That was the first time I had a serious talk with him and came to know anything about him. After that I met him on several different occasions; he and I were guests together in Ostermann's house in Alsace for quite a long time, and there I got to know him very well. We were again together at Weiser Hirsch, which is a suburb of Dresden, along with Mrs. Russak and Mrs. Van Hook. He was there for quite a long time. Then, again, of course I saw

¹ From a private collection.

him at Adyar. During these years he became General Secretary in London. I was not in London at that time. I was living in Italy then, but I heard about his activities. He was supposed to do very well as General Secretary – he was very business-like, and I believe was very much liked by the people.

He carries people very much with him and I believe was very well liked there except that he became unpopular with certain section because he always defended me. At that particular time people were attacking me about all sorts of things, and I remained obstinately silent which made them very angry; it aggravated them so much more than anything I could possibly have said. It is fine policy to maintain a sphinx-like silence and then your friends can say: “If he only chose to speak what he could say”. But if you say anything the other side only mangle it and answer it and make further attacks. It occasionally pays very well to say nothing at all.

However, he defended me, possibly rashly and incautiously sometimes; he got himself unpopular with a certain section through that. I think from that time may date the animosity shown against him by Major Adam. I am not certain of this, but when a couple of years or more ago the rumours began to go about here, it was because a certain Major Adam in London had set them in motion. Adam appealed to Baillie-Weaver, the Secretary of the British Section to investigate those charges against Wedgwood. Baillie-Weaver replied that he was the Secretary of the Section, and was not in charge of the private morals of its members and that it was no business of his. Adam was bitterly offended. Next time the President was in England he appealed to her, but to his disgust and disappointment she took Baillie-Weaver’s side and said she was not going into the matter, that there were too many members in the Society for her to be in charge of their affairs. For the time the matter ended, but Adam’s conversation about it did not end.

Then, or about that time, I am not sure of the exact relative dates of the different things, Wedgwood came out here to see me. You remember his first visit. Then he told me that circumstances had practically put into his hands the organisation in the British Empire of the Old Catholic Church. You can read in the history of the movement how that happened by the defection of Mathew in one direction and other people in the other directions. He was the leading man left, though only a priest then in the Old Catholic Church in England. There had been some discussion as to whether the whole thing should be given up, but the opinion of the other priests (there were two or three priests then whose names I do not know) but those whom we know, Bishops King and Gauntlett were nominally in charge of it, and neither of them felt himself capable of carrying on a big movement, but they both recognized that Wedgwood would be able to do it if he would be consecrated as Bishop. I believe that at the time Mathew was willing to consecrate him; later on he was not, discovering what Theosophy meant and not agreeing with it, and so the consecration was finally done by Bishop Willoughby.

Wedgwood came out here to see me, and said to me that he would undertake this thing if I would promise help and support. He said that he would accept consecration only on the condition that he was allowed to return to Australia and consecrate me in order to help me in the work. What he chiefly wanted me for was to act as a link with the Master and so on, because he wished if he took charge of this movement to put it absolutely and unreservedly at the feet of the Masters to be used by Them. I agreed; he went back again to Europe and was consecrated eventually by Willoughby. Then he came out here and passed on the consecration to me, and immediately he had done that he offered to me the Headship of the

whole movement as Presiding Bishop. That is an important point for you to remember in view of some things the President herself said afterwards. He especially offered all this to me. I declined on two grounds. First because of that 1906 scandal; I said: "It is no use putting at the head of an organization which is going to grow into a big thing a man over whom a thing like that is hanging, because you never get rid of it. In the very nature of the case such charges cannot be disproven any more than they can be proved; it would not be advisable with that taint that I should take charge of the movement, and then secondly I am an old man; you are a young man; you can hold it for forty years; I can hold it for two or three, who knows? He gave way, but at least he insisted that I should manage things here in Australia for him. I was willing to do that if he would appoint an Auxiliary who could take charge when I happened to die. Then we worked at that Liturgy. I believe between us we read between sixty and seventy books on ancient Liturgies. We got all the Liturgies we could possibly raise and we compared them. We got some here in the Public Library. We were able to buy others; we borrowed some and altogether we did the best we could. Then we had to undertake a great deal of clairvoyant investigation to see what was the custom of the Early Church in regard to this point or that that came up in our reading; was there a foundation for such-and-such stories in the Catholic Encyclopedia or had they been invented since. A vast amount of work had to be done to get that Liturgy ready and it took us fully two years to get the whole thing out.

Meantime Mr. Martyn, who at that time was by way of supporting us in the Church, was very anxious about the Constitution. The Constitution seemed to us of far less importance than the Liturgy. We must have a Liturgy in order that our services may go on. The Constitution, the legal part of the business (as we had no money and were and were not paying or receiving salaries) did not seem to us a serious thing. However Mr. Martyn insisted very much upon it, and eventually Wedgwood said to him: "You draw up what you think would be suitable for us", because the old constitution as it stood was manifestly not a very satisfactory document; it was far too prolix and it included a quantity of points that did not seem to me to belong to a Constitution. A Constitution is not necessarily a declaration of faith; there was a quantity of, frankly I think, rubbish in that old Constitution. That is the one that Mr. Martyn attacked. I believe you all have copies of the revived Constitution at which we arrived. But the interesting point as bearing on this little controversy is that we asked Mr. Martyn to give us suggestions; we said: "You put down what you think ought to be our Constitution." He seems to have forgotten, but here is the document which he himself wrote. You had better look at it and then you can say that you have seen it.

Copy of Draft Constitution drawn up by Mr. T.H. Martyn.

The Old Catholic Church should it is suggested make quite clear that:

- (1) The Church exists for the benefit of the people individually and collectively and to further their spiritual unfoldment.
- (2) That Belief is entirely free to each individual, also the manner of interpretation of the Creeds and Scriptures which the Church adopts.
- (3) That all matters relating to the ownership of property in any form shall be controlled by the laity or by the Trusts appointed by the laity of the Church.

(Note by Bishop Leadbeater: “That the property of each Church shall be vested in three Trustees, one of whom shall be appointed by the Priest in charge of the Church, and the other two elected by the members of the congregation.”)

- (4) That the procedure by which certain persons are made effective channels for the diffusion of the Life and Blessing of the Great Head of the Church (the Lord Christ) is recognised (this procedure has been described as the “Apostolic Succession”). That only such persons as have been duly ordained in accordance with the Sacraments of the Church shall be eligible to become its Clergy.
- (5) That the Clergy shall control all matters relating to the performance of the Sacraments, and the Services of the Church.
Rules for Clergy. They shall adopt the form of Ritual (now) provided and follow same. This form may be altered or permanently varied only by the agreement of not less than two-thirds of Bishops holding office at any particular time.
- (6) That the Clergy may not expel any person from membership of the Church nor refuse the Sacraments of Baptism and Burial, but they shall decide who is fit and proper to take part in the Sacraments of or to be accepted into the priesthood.

As soon as we received that, Wedgwood and I said to him (we often talked together in those days), “We cannot accept that on behalf of the whole church; it has to be accepted by the Bishops in England and the priests there, but meantime I (C.W.L.) am quite willing to work under that as a temporary Constitution for Australia until you get the other one.” As a matter of fact it is under that Constitution that we have been working here in Australia until this now one came out.

It might interest you, though it has nothing to do with the work, and out here not being a State Church the organization had absolutely nothing in the nature of a Constitution and he really thought it ought to have one. Martyn thought that before we even had a Service we must have a Constitution down on paper. The Church of England has jogged along without one, and apparently has not suffered much. Here it was going on for three hundred years and had nothing to do – there were acts of Parliament which more or less took the place of a Constitution, but they were not known to the people who were supposed to work under them.

That which you have just read is a perfectly fair draft, and I instantly accepted it and said, “We will work under that until something else is drawn up.” It is under that that we have been working all this time. We have not needed to refer to it for we were all working together as friends and we did not need any legal document; but such as it is, there it is.

Perhaps one should say something about Mr. Martyn’s attitude then. At that time he was quite friendly to the Church, regarding it justly as one of the three activities which had been recommended by the President [Mrs. Annie Besant]. You remember that in October, 1916, she made mention of the three activities – the Educational Trust, Co-Masonry and the Old Catholic Church as three which should be, she thought, promoted by members of the Theosophical Society. I can read you exactly what she wrote.

“Such are three embryonic Movements (of which the O.C.C. now the L.C.C. was one) which will grow strong and powerful in the coming years. In each one of them work is going on in preparation for the Coming and fortunate are those who, in the days of their weakness, are intuitional enough to seize the significance and to

strengthen them with their adhesion. A dozen years hence, readers who remember these words will realize their truth.”

