

## CHAPTER V

### PARISHES IN THE MAKING

THE first hint of this process, and of the shape of things to come, dates from as early as the middle of the sixth century. By that time districts had been assigned to certain private churches, by which they became in effect rural parishes; and there is an actual reference to them by that name. The reference is to *parochias in domibus potentium*—parishes in the homes or domains of the powerful. At the same time, oddly enough, there is a reference to 'a diocese in one's own estate'—diocese in this instance signifying not the sphere of a bishop but the domain of a landowner served by a private chapel or oratory and its chaplain. Thus the terms parish and diocese, which were both used at that date and for centuries later to define the area of an episcopate, were beginning to be applied also to rural districts and their communities served by private churches, under chaplains who held no higher office than that of presbyter or priest. Gradually, as the number of these rural parishes increased, the two terms became differentiated; the term parish began to be identified with them, and dissociated from the sphere of a bishop, which finally came to be known universally as his diocese.

By the time of Charlemagne (742-814) these rural parishes, as we shall see, had become fairly numerous and widespread. Largely by his influence and efforts the Church in Gaul and throughout his far-flung dominions became fairly generally organized

along these lines. From the multiplication of such rural parishes and the gradual and hard-won recognition of the rights claimed by them, there emerged finally that system of parish churches with their surrounding parishes with which the world has been so long familiar. Before tracing the process by which their claims were at last acknowledged and their status established, it will be helpful to have in mind a clear picture of the ecclesiastical layout in medieval times.

In Charlemagne's time there were three distinct types of religious foundation. The first was the Baptismal-Church or cathedral in each principal town, with its episcopal parish or diocese stretching over a larger or smaller, but always extensive, territorial area. The second was the monastery, including its monastic church of minster, abbey, or priory, with its abbot or prior holding quasi-episcopal rank and authority, and with lands, properties, and outposts no less extensive than those of a bishopric. Subject only to canon law and the rules of their orders, supreme ecclesiastical authority, and latterly enormous wealth, were vested in these powerful institutions.

The third type of religious foundation varied. Daughter churches of the original Baptismal-Church were founded by evangelizing efforts of bishops within their own episcopal parishes; local 'cells' or centres, sometimes far afield, were established by the missionary zeal of abbots or priors and their monks; chapels and oratories, which were in effect private churches, were erected by the piety of large landowners, concerned for the salvation of their own souls and those of their families, as well as for the religious welfare of their people; and, finally, townships growing in numbers and importance, led by their overlords or their more

wealthy burgesses, built town churches of their own to meet their growing need and to be monuments of a worthy civic consciousness and pride. These all differed in origin, but they had one thing in common ; they were all subordinate to and almost completely dependent upon the over-ruling religious authorities to which they were attached.

As certain of these subordinate churches grew in importance and influence they began to press for a fuller and more settled ministry, a larger measure of independence and control of their own resources, and the exercise of those Christian rights and the administration of those Christian ordinances which had hitherto been jealously reserved as the exclusive privileges of Baptismal-Churches. As might be expected, this movement towards greater local autonomy was started and sustained mainly by private and public donors, landowners, and townships, who not only erected chapels or churches at their own expense, but provided endowments for their ministry and maintenance.

It is not to be supposed that the full claims made on behalf of these subordinate churches were granted all at once or always in the same order. They were advanced as the need for them became increasingly felt, and as pressure to have them conceded became correspondingly strong and urgent. In general, however, the process of local ecclesiastical development was marked by three steps or stages.

The first claim to be officially recognized and conceded was the claim to a fuller local ministry. In justice to the central ecclesiastical authorities it is to be observed that this concession was made as a rule freely, not so much under constraint of local pressure as in

response to an obvious spiritual need. To begin with local churches were little more than mission stations, preaching and teaching centres with an itinerant or at best a restricted resident ministry. Even the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper could be dispensed only by priests appointed for this purpose from the Baptismal-Church, and around portable altars carried from place to place to serve local congregations. The possession and use of a stationary altar of its own, and the investment of its incumbent with powers of discipline, marked a distinct advance in the development of a local church or chapel towards a full Christian ministry.

A second step in the same direction was the delimitation of an area within which this ministry could be exercised, and whose population was placed under the spiritual care and discipline of the priest or chaplain in charge. We have seen that, as early as the middle of the sixth century, certain private churches had districts assigned to them which were in effect country parishes. During the next two centuries or so this practice must have become increasingly common. The fact that by that time they were officially designated as rural parishes is evidence that they were already numerous enough to require a distinctive name. Not only so, but the churches by which they were served were also accorded, under certain conditions, a recognized and regular status.

The reason for this development is interesting. The churches erected in the 'domains of the powerful' or in the 'diocese of one's own estate' were provided by the landowners concerned. The buildings themselves, the incumbents in charge, and the permitted ordinances, were all maintained by them at their own expense. They appointed their own chaplains, either inde-

pendently or in consultation with the bishops in whose parishes their estates were situated. It would only be in accordance with human nature that, paying the piper, they felt they had a right to call the tune. In any case, whether appointed independently or with the episcopal approval, these chaplains were more or less private religious officials, independent of support from the bishop or the Baptismal-Church, and to that extent free from episcopal direction and control.

So rapidly did this practice grow that the Church authorities took alarm. Too many priests were passing from under their immediate supervision; and the discipline and even the organic unity of the Church itself were imperilled. So in 540 a Council was called and a canon passed, placing restrictions and conditions on the erection of such private religious foundations. The main conditions were that every such privately founded church should be under the jurisdiction of the bishop; that it should be sufficiently endowed; that no incumbent should be appointed to it without the bishop's consent; and that, while for the sake of convenience regular services might ordinarily be held in it, on the occasion of the greater Festivals the whole Christian community served by it must repair to worship in the Baptismal-Church, there to make their offerings and pay their vows. In addition, the rights of Christian baptism and burial were reserved for the Baptismal-Church alone.

It might be supposed that such strict conditions would have checked the increase of privately founded churches in their rural parishes. On the contrary, their numbers steadily grew, and the reason is not far to seek. A recognized and regular status and a delimited area officially designated as their parish, presented a goal

to which all subordinate churches could aspire, and proved to be a definite step towards full parochial status.

The third step in the process was the increasing pressure which these churches were able to exercise in respect of their growing numbers and influence and their command of material resources. We have seen that to begin with all local revenues, both the gifts of pious donors and the free-will offerings of the people, were vested in the Baptismal-Church under the administration of the bishop. When a statutory minimum endowment was imposed, however, as part of the price of official recognition, sufficient for the support of the incumbent, the maintenance of fabric and ordinances, and other necessary local purposes, the situation was radically changed. This endowment was frequently increased, either by the family of the original donor or by others, who stipulated that their gifts should be devoted to the church in which they were specially interested. This provision was not always observed. There was always a temptation for those in charge of the administration to reserve the lion's share for their own Baptismal-Churches or for ecclesiastical purposes in general. Thus it often happened that local religious services were only perfunctorily discharged, buildings fell into disrepair, and the spiritual interests of the people were neglected. In these circumstances it was inevitable that a sense of injustice should be aroused, that local grievances should rankle, and that donors and people alike should begin to demand some control over their own endowments.

A powerful factor in establishing this claim, although it operated at a somewhat later period, was the rise of medieval townships. These townships, growing up

under the fostering influence of their overlords and acquiring wealth and importance through trade, not only became considerable communities but began to develop a strong civic consciousness. One of the ways in which this civic pride found expression was in the erection of splendid public buildings, and not least of churches. The time came when the church, provided in the first instance by an overlord, had to be enlarged or rebuilt. Growing wealth and a finer taste demanded that its whole style and equipment should be more elaborate and artistic and on a grander scale, to match the civic pride and meet the spiritual needs of the growing community. Both in wealth and in numbers these townships were in a position to exercise a powerful influence on their appropriate church authorities, and to secure for themselves a larger control over their own endowments and an enhanced status for their churches.

How far this process had advanced by the time of Charlemagne it is impossible to ascertain. All the evidence goes to indicate that considerable progress had been made. What is certain is that the policy of that great emperor and churchman gave a powerful impetus to the whole movement, and provided the remaining necessary factor which led to its consummation. This factor was the statutory imposition of tithes.

Charlemagne was deeply concerned to strengthen and extend the influence of the Church, and he set about doing this in a systematic and thorough-going way. Through his friendship with Alcuin of York, one of the greatest scholars of his day, he had a high conception of the value of education for purposes both of Church and State. The provision of an educated priesthood, the training of sons of nobles and others to fit

them for State appointments, and even the regular religious instruction of children of all classes, were included in his educational policy. To this end he started schools in every bishopric and monastery, himself leading the way by establishing a royal school at his own court. He also called upon all bishops to see to it that the priests throughout their parishes (*i.e.* their bishoprics) should be men who 'preached rightly and honestly.' (Capitulars of 778 and 789.) They must be men of education and character, who exercised their ministry with earnestness and purpose. Finally, he ordained that 'Whether noble or gentle or of lower degree all must give, according to God's commandment, of their substance and labour to the churches and priests.' As his Empire included the whole of western Europe, and his writ ran from the North Sea to the Mediterranean and from the Rhine to the Ebro, this ordinance was gradually but steadily established throughout his wide dominions.

The statutory imposition of tithes was fraught with far-reaching consequences, and did much to determine the future character and constitution of the Church. Hitherto the payment of tithes had been voluntary, or at best enforceable only under ecclesiastical penalties. Now that it was made obligatory by imperial decree, the revenues of the Church were not only greatly increased but became a perpetual charge both upon land and labour. As had been the case with all voluntary gifts and offerings, these statutory tithes were payable to the bishop and were under his sole administration, subject only to the general laws of the Church regarding their use. So far, therefore, there was no change, save what has already been recorded, in the relationship of local churches to the Baptismal-Church,

or in the authority of the bishop over them. These remained as they had been.

At the Council of Aix-la-Chapelle, however, in 816, the claims of local churches, reinforced by their payment of the statutory tithe, were recognized by substantial concessions. The provisions made by this Council for local churches need only to be stated, to show how considerably, if also guardedly, local religious claims and requirements were met. It was provided (1) that whatever was given voluntarily to the Church by local donors, unless otherwise specified, should be devoted to the local church; (2) that every church should have its own priest, if means for his support were furnished to the satisfaction of the bishop; (3) that the appointment of priests to, or their removal from, the churches of lay founders, should not take place without the bishop's consent; and (4) that to every church 'one entire manse' should be set apart free from all services, *i.e.* free from tax or burden whether ecclesiastical or feudal.

These were marked innovations on the law and general practice of the Church, although to some extent, and increasingly, they were already in operation. The Council, in short, gave definition and official authority to what had become a fairly common practice. One other provision, however, was of a more revolutionary character and furnished a precedent for what proved to be far-reaching consequences. It enacted that the tithes pertaining to new townships, in which new churches were founded, might be granted to those churches. This formal allocation of local tithes to a local church, even if that church were of a particular type, was the thin end of the wedge. What was legally the right of one type of local church must, and did,

in course of time become the acknowledged right of all.

This Council of Aix-la-Chapelle, then, went far to lay the foundations of the future parochial system, and to erect the framework of the parish church and parish that were to be. A settled ministry, an assured and adequate stipend, an 'entire manse' (with garden, glebe, and other appurtenances), a delimited area, and the crowning right of applying local tithes to local religious purposes, included all that was necessary to constitute parish and parish church in the accepted sense.

Only one thing was lacking to complete their constitution—the right of Christian baptism and burial. This was the last right to be conceded. It was natural that the solemn offices which mark the beginning and the end of the life of a Christian upon earth should be associated with the Mother-Church; and incidentally it was also profitable that this prerogative of the greater sanctuaries should be jealously reserved and guarded. The concession of other rights to local churches, however, and their growing power and influence, made it impossible that this right should be withheld from them; and so finally, with a stationary altar, a baptismal font at its western door, a God's-acre under the shadow of its walls, a full and settled Christian ministry, and adequate equipment and endowment for its exercise, every approved local sanctuary became in time a parish church, with a priest, parishioners, and parish of its own.