

THE CHURCH AFLOAT

Ships and their Chaplains

In 1683, Samuel Pepys and Thomas Ken, afterwards Bishop of Bath and Wells, were shipmates in the fleet sent to dismantle Tangier. Pepys was clerk of the Navy Board and Ken was chaplain of the fleet. Pepys, who could be a caustic critic of the clergy, has left on record his kindly reminiscences of the chaplain and his services on board ship.

The saintly Bishop Ken was the first holder of the office of chaplain of the fleet. He was appointed "for the service of God, for the preservation of the many souls that are at stake, and the good governance of the chaplains that are in the fleet." Chaplains there had been since the reign of King Stephen; but from the days of Ken must be dated that orderly ministration of Word and Sacraments provided by the Church for the men of His Majesty's Navy, both ashore and afloat, which is ensured by King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions.

The Church in the Navy upholds a fine tradition of service and worship, and since no one has written the history of the naval chaplains it is permissible to surmise that some part at least of that tradition is a heritage from the first chaplain of the fleet. It is assisted by the fact that sailors are, on the whole, God-fearing men, for, as the Psalmist put it long ago, "these men see the wonders of the Lord." Certainly there is no mistaking the importance which the Admiralty attaches to the place of religion in the daily life of the Navy. King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions provide that daily Morning Prayer shall be said on board every ship of war, and that the usual services shall be held on Sunday. Where there is no chaplain the commanding officer or someone deputed by him says each day short Morning Prayers and also conducts a service on Sunday morning at least. Besides the regular morning service there is, in all ships carrying a chaplain, and in some ships which do not carry one, a voluntary evening service.

A Ship's Place for Worship.

These services are in all cases, states the chaplain to the fleet, the Ven. Thomas Crick, whose words I am quoting, held in that part of the ship which is found most convenient for gathering together the ship's company; and everything is prepared and arranged, as far as possible, with a view to rendering the place suitable for divine service. In battleships and in some smaller vessels there is a properly appointed chapel. One which I visited a few years ago had a really beautiful chapel, most of the panelling and wood carving of which had been done as a labour of love by members of the ship's company. In an aumbry the Blessed Sacrament was reserved and the customary white light was burning near.

Though I hope to say something of the Missions to Seamen later, my present purpose is to give some impressions of the work of naval chaplains which I have received during a tour of naval establishments. By the great kindness of the chaplain of the fleet, who put himself to much trouble in devising a programme for my visits, and by the good will and hospitality of the various naval authorities both in London and elsewhere, I have had my eyes opened to some very heartening facts. Writing as I am in the midst of my tour, it would be premature and unwise to attempt any summary conclusions. I must, however, mention one circumstance which strikes the ordinary shore-staying Churchman as significant, and that is the entirely easy and natural terms on which the naval chaplain, whether afloat or in a shore establishment, consorts with all and sundry.

One of the advantages claimed for the wearing of ordinary lay dress, at least occasionally, by clerics is that (provided the disguise is successful) it removes the constraint which generally pervades any heterogeneous assembly of people on the appearance of a clergyman in its midst. It gives a chance, so it is alleged, of meeting the ordinary man of the world on a

man-to-man footing. The clerical collar does not seem to separate the naval chaplain from his fellows as it tends to separate his civilian brother. By that I do not mean to imply that the officers in the wardroom or the ratings on the lower deck have not the traditional regard for the "cloth," and govern their conversation accordingly. What I do mean is that they have not the absurdly wrong-headed conception of the clergy as a class apart from all others, and remote from the life and the concerns of the average man, which is held by the ordinary man in the street, pub and train.

The Chaplain Has No Rank.

It is most refreshing to notice the cordial relations which subsist between the chaplain and the officers and men with whom he is serving. They accept him as one of themselves. In the last few days I have been taken in tow by several chaplains—men of most diverse types—and have stayed in barracks and training establishments, and visited ships of various sorts from corvettes and minesweepers to the most modern destroyer depot-ship. Never was there at any time the smallest reminder of that stilted and self-conscious conversation and behaviour that is all too common elsewhere when the clergy are about. The cheery greetings, the badinage, the exchange of current gossip about ships and men, was entirely unaffected and spontaneous. Discussions in wardroom messes obviously lost nothing in animation because there was a parson at the table.

The naval chaplain has an advantage over his brethren in the other services in that he has neither rank nor equivalent rank. Nor has he any prescribed uniform, an exception which cause no difficulties or misunderstandings when a chaplain is living on board ship and is at sea. It is, however, inconvenient when the chaplains are at work in dockyards or other shore establishments, for then they are constantly exposed to the necessity of explaining themselves and producing evidence of identity more often than would otherwise be called for.

The result is that all the chaplains I have so far met wear a naval cap somewhat similar to that in general