

Chapter VI.

THE CHURCHING OF WOMEN.

THE "Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth, commonly called the Churching of Women," is translated from the ancient Latin Office of the English Church—the "Ordo ad purificandam mulierem post partum, ante ostium Ecclesiæ." The only law respecting it is that of the rubric, and this is very indefinite in its directions.

There is much uncertainty, indeed, whether or not the service is intended for all women who have borne children, or only for those who have borne them in lawful matrimony. Baron Alderson expressed a strong opinion, in the case of *Reg. v. Benson*, in July, 1856, that every woman who has been delivered of a child has a right to be churched, and ought to give thanks to God for her safe deliverance. This right has, however, its limitations, for it has never been the common custom of the Church of England since the Reformation, and probably not before, to admit unmarried women to this privilege without some act declaring their penitence.

In Archbishop Grindal's 'Injunctions for the Province of York,' issued in the year 1571, there is one directing

What women are entitled to the Service.

the clergy: "That they should not church any unmarried woman, which had been gotten with child out of lawful matrimony, except it were upon some Sunday or holy-day; and except either she, before childbed, had done penance, or at her churching did acknowledge her fault before the congregation." [Cardw. *Doc. Ann.* i. 335.] In the same archbishop's 'Articles of Visitation for the Province of Canterbury' [A.D. 1576], there is also the following inquiry: "Whether your parson, vicar, curate, minister, or reader, do church any unmarried woman which hath been gotten with child out of lawful marriage, and say for her the Form of Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth, except such an unmarried woman have either before her childbirth done due penance for her fault to the satisfaction of the congregation, or at her coming to give thanks do openly acknowledge her fault before the congregation, at the appointment of the minister, according to order prescribed to the said minister by the ordinary or his deputy; the same churching to be had always on some Sunday or holy-day, and upon none other day?" [*Ibid.* 404.] Similar inquiries are also to be found in the visitation articles of most of the dioceses of England down to the time of the Civil War.

At the Savoy Conference, the Puritans gave in, as one of their exceptions to the Churching Service: "It may fall out that a woman may come to give thanks for a child born in adultery or fornication, and therefore we desire that something may be required of her, by way of profession of her humiliation, as well as of her thanksgiving." [Cardw. *Conf.* 334.] To this the bishops replied:

“If the woman be such as is here mentioned, she is to do her penance before she is churched.” [*Ibid.* 362.] The Puritans objected, that this involved a formal process in the Ecclesiastical Court, which was not often practicable, “not to one of a multitude; and what shall the minister do with all the rest?” [*Grand Debate between Bishops and Presbyterians*, p. 147.] Nothing, however, was formally enjoined, and since that time the reception or rejection of such women has been left to the judgment of the parish priest.

In Archdeacon Hale’s *Precedents* there are several presentations of clergymen for refusing to church women who did not wear veils or kerchiefs when they came to their thanksgivings, and of women for coming without them: “The said Tabitha did not come to be churched in a vaile” [p. 259]. “Presentatur, for that she, being admonished that when she came to church to give God thanks for her safe deliverance in childbirth, that she should come with such ornaments as other honest women usually have done, she did not, but coming in her hat, and a quarter about her neck, sat down in her seat, where she could not be descried, nor seen unto what the thanksgiving was read” [p. 237]. In an inventory of church-goods belonging to St. Benet’s, Gracechurch, in 1560, there is “a churching-cloth, fringed, white damask,” from which it would seem that the veil was in some cases provided by the Church. Elborow speaks of the veil being commonly used in the latter half of the seventeenth century; and Bishop Gibson [*Cod.* xviii. 12] records a case, in which the

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judges referred to the Archbishop of Canterbury on the subject, who called together several bishops, and taking their opinion the judges decided that the custom of the Church of England required the veil to be worn. [2 Rolle, *Abridg.* 221.] And even if the use of the veil be considered obsolete, the rubric is still binding as to decency of apparel, and a modest covering for the head must undoubtedly be included under the term.

As the title of the Latin office shows, the ancient place for the churching was the church-door, **Place for** "*ante ostium ecclesiæ;*" the church-porch being **Churching.** then used for several ceremonies, as at the first part of Baptism and Marriage. In 1549 this was altered to the choir-door; and "nigh unto the table" was directed in 1552. The tenth of Bishop Wren's 'Orders and Injunctions for the Diocese of Norwich,' in 1636, enjoins: "That women to be churched come and kneel at a side near the communion-table without the rail, being veiled according to the custom, and not covered with a hat; or otherwise not to be churched, but presented at the next generals by the minister, or churchwardens, or any of them." In Bishop Brian Duppa's *Articles of Visitation* of 1638, there is a similar one: "Doth he go into the chancel, the woman also repairing thither, kneeling as near the communion-table as may be; and if there be a Communion, doth she communicate, in acknowledgment of the great blessing received by her safe delivery? Doth the woman who is to be churched use the accustomed habit in such cases with a white veil or kerchief upon her head?" The present rubric gives no directions, further than that the

woman "shall kneel down in some convenient place as hath been accustomed, or as the ordinary shall direct."

It is evident that the Churching of Women is intended to be a service *in facie ecclesiæ*, and the concluding rubric directs that "if there be a Communion, it is convenient that she receive the Holy Communion." But the celebration of these occasional and personal offices of the Church in the time of Divine Service, at least on Sundays, is probably a much more public form of celebration *in facie ecclesiæ* than was contemplated in ancient times; and a churching in the presence of the priest and a few attendants is quite within the spirit of the law, while it is much more suitable to the circumstances of the woman than a very public ceremony would be.

It may be observed, in conclusion, that there is no legal justification for the performance of this office by a priest only. by a deacon, a priest being expressly named three times in the rubric.