

THE ORDER OF DEACONESSES.

The Encyclical Letter issued by the Archbishops and Bishops at the close of the Lambeth Conference, and the Resolutions which it formally adopted in regard to the revival of the Diaconate of Women, recalls to our attention the practice of the Primitive Church in this respect.

THE PRACTICE OF THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH.

In "A History of Nursing" we are told by Miss Nutting and Miss Dock that "the earliest Orders of women workers in the Church, and the ones especially concerned with nursing, were those of the Deaconesses and Widows. Later appeared the Virgin, the Presbyteress, the Canoness and the Nun.

"The chronicles of Christian nursing begin with the diaconate, which included men and women having similar functions, the chief of which was the care of the poor and the sick. From the earliest Apostolic times, deaconesses were placed on a level with deacons, and the title 'diakonus,' as used by St. Paul in speaking of Phoebe of Cenchrea, was applied equally to men and women. . . . Nor did the women monopolise the nursing.

"The deaconess, ranking with the clergy, was ordained by the bishop, with the consent of the congregation, by the laying on of hands. Her duties, like those of the deacon, were both secular and clerical. She was the first parish worker, friendly visitor, and district nurse, and from her day the work of visiting nursing has never been unknown. Although all converts to the primitive Church, more especially women with leisure, regarded it as a sacred duty to comfort the afflicted, it was the special duty of the deaconess to attend the sick in their own homes. She also visited prisoners, assisted the needy from Church funds, counselled the afflicted and carried the messages of the clergy. Her religious duties were very important. She taught, catechised and brought the women converts to baptism or baptised them herself; stood at the women's door in the churches and showed them to their places, brought them to the Lord's Supper, and assisted at the altar during the sacrament. Tucker and Malleson, who give more explicit details than many writers, say: 'The terms used for the ordering of men and women clergy were identical. Both were ordained by the imposition of hands. The new deaconess then sang the Gospel. The Bishop placed the stole on her neck, after which she took the veil or pallium from the altar, and clothed herself

with it. She also received a maniple, ring, and crown. . . . She administered the sacraments to the confessors in prison, and in the mass communicated the women with the cup, the deacons communicating the men. In some places she read the homily, and deaconesses are mentioned in several ancient lectionaries.' Beside the deaconesses, sub-deaconesses are mentioned in records dating from the third century. They were not ordained by the imposition of hands, and did not count as a sacred order, but were elected, with the consent of the clergy, by the bishop. There were also archdeaconesses. St. Gregory of Nyssa speaks of his sister Macrina as an archdeaconess. The primitive deaconess might be married, or a widow or virgin. It was not until the second century that the sentiment in favour of celibacy became pronounced, and after that date the deaconess was required to be a pure virgin, or at least, a widow who had been but once married. She might also, as was equally the case with other orders of women, live in her own home, nor is it clear that she at first wore a special dress. The fourth council of Carthage mentioned a special dress for deaconesses who have 'put away their lay garments,' and a fresco from the catacomb Hermetis, representing two widows and deaconesses at the bedside of a sick person, shows them in an ample tunic, with stiff headdress going round the face. The deaconesses' liturgical dress was the diaconal alb, stole, and maniple.

"The deaconess likewise, at first, retained control over her property, and a State law then forbade her to enrich churches and institutions at the expense of those having just claims on her."

THE LAMBETH DECISIONS.

The Lambeth Encyclical Letter includes the following clauses:—

THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN.

"The duty of preserving and strengthening the fellowship of the Church belongs specially to a smaller fellowship within it, the fellowship of the ordained ministry. The three orders of bishops, priests and deacons have always been assisted in their ministry by many others who at different times and in different places have had different names and positions.

There has been much discussion of late about the admission of women to share in the ministry of the Church, both in the wider and in the narrower sense of those words; and the Church must frankly acknowledge that it has undervalued and neglected the gifts of women and

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)