CHAPTER 3

Episcopal Leadership and Parochial Life: Two Case Studies

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Introduction

‘Episcopal leadership’ is not a phrase which you would have been likely to hear from the lips of the average Anglican bishop in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Nevertheless the phrase describes well the relationship which an active bishop could have with his clergy in this period. A bishop was required to oversee the work of his clergy and maintain discipline, but the relationship was not like that between modern employers or managers and their staff. A clergyman was largely autonomous once he had been instituted to his living and a bishop was not in a position to coerce or drive his clergy. What he could reasonably attempt to do was to lead, encourage, and inspire them to change for the better the way they led their lives and worked within their parishes.

After having received an almost universally bad press from critics and historians since about the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the bishops and clergy of the pre-Victorian church have been, to a large extent, rehabilitated over the last twenty to thirty years. They are now more likely to be seen as generally active and conscientious, with bishops maintaining a loose but regular oversight and seeking fairly constantly to institute reform. Individual, successful bishops are most likely to be spoken of as ‘able administrators’ or ‘reformers,’ and they tend to be judged in this by such things as whether they ordained regularly in their diocese, how often they confirmed, and how far they encouraged their clergy to carry out their duties well and conscientiously. This might include encouraging them to reside in their livings; to maintain a sober and appropriate manner of dress and speech; to perform ‘double duty,'


by saying divine service twice on Sundays; to celebrate Holy Communion more frequently; to catechise regularly; to arrange for the education of the poor; and to keep the fabric and contents of their churches in good order. However, what is not clear is how far in fact a bishop, however conscientious and reforming, could hope to effect change in a diocese when his actual power over his clergy was so limited.

One of the main ways in which they attempted to do so was through the visitation process, which took place normally every three years. Bishops surveyed their dioceses by means of questionnaires, met their clergy in the course of a tour of the diocese, and issued a Charge, communicating to them whatever the bishop thought it most important that they should hear. These Charges varied considerably in content but by the early nineteenth century they were increasingly being used, in conjunction with the visitation queries, to encourage the clergy of the diocese to bring about specific changes. What this paper sets out to do is to consider how effective such measures could be in practice; what difference it might actually make on the ground, in the parishes, whether or not a bishop was energetic, active, and reforming. To do this it considers the evidence provided by the visitation returns for two neighbouring dioceses whose bishops took a very different approach in the early years of the nineteenth century.

The Dioceses: Llandaff and St David's

The two dioceses which I intend to look at are the two southernmost Welsh dioceses, Llandaff and St David's. In many ways the two dioceses were similar. They were both amongst the poorest dioceses in England and Wales, in terms both of clerical and of episcopal incomes. In the mid-eighteenth century, 84% of parishes in Llandaff diocese and 92% of parishes in St David's diocese were officially classed as impoverished, with incomes of less than £50 a year. Graduate clergy were hard to attract and, in these two dioceses, many clergy-men had been educated only at one of the grammar schools or nonconformist academies.

Both dioceses were predominantly rural in character, with a scattered population and few towns of any size. In 1770 Carmarthen, in St David's diocese, was the largest town in Wales, with a population of about 4,000. However, in the early nineteenth century, Britain saw significant population growth even in rural areas but as far as Wales was concerned this was especially so in those

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