



The Office of Verger

The office of Verger is an ancient one and, some might say, older than the Christian Church itself, possibly tracing its origins back to the Temple Servants of the Old Testament.

The Jewish priesthood was limited to the tribe of Levi (third of the twelve sons of Jacob), and within that tribe further limited to one family, the house of Aaron (the first high priest). To the non-priestly Levites were given sundry lesser duties connected with the sacred office. The Priests and Levites were assisted by a third, specialist group of temple servants and "Gatekeepers".

'The gatekeepers had been assigned to their positions of trust by David and Samuel the seer. They and their descendants were in charge of guarding the gates of the house of the Lord... entrusted with the responsibility for the rooms and treasuries in the house of God. They would spend the night stationed round the house of God, because they had charge of the key for opening it each morning. Some of them were in charge of the articles used in the temple service; they counted them when they were brought in and when they were taken out. Others were assigned to take care of the furnishings and all the other articles of the sanctuary, as well as the flour and wine, and oil, incense and spices. But some of the priests took care of mixing the spices.'

1 Chronicles 9v. 22-31

The early Christian Church, therefore, appears to have had good precedent for appointing Ministers to care for the practical needs of the worshipping community, to guard the holy sites associated with Jesus' life and ministry, and to assist the Elders and Presbyters. By the end of the fourth century AD the role and ministry of these servants had been formalised, resulting in the creation of the "Minor Orders" of Ostiarius (Doorkeeper), Exorcist, Lector, and Acolyte, into which orders they were ordained, their collective duties being to assist the "Major Orders" of Bishop, Priest and Deacon. A fourteenth century illustrated manuscript preserved in Cambridge, "The Pontifical of the Three Bishops", shows the ordination of a doorkeeper in which the Bishop presents him with two gilded keys.

As the mediaeval Church elaborated its worship, the liturgy, (and therefore the preparations beforehand in the sacristy), became increasingly complex, requiring more men in Holy Orders to perform the liturgy and more Clerks in Minor Orders to prepare and assist. In 1390 Salisbury Cathedral had 130 'Clerks'. The Treasury (now the vestry) was "managed" on behalf of the Chapter by a Sub-Treasurer, who employed two Sacrists and "two Minor Clerks of the sacristy", who were in turn assisted by the Common Beadle and the Janitor. Their duties were many and various, and often very complex, with a multitude of services each day, festivals, anniversaries and obits, and of course a constant stream of pilgrims to the shrine of Saint Osmund.

The Use of Sarum (the mediaeval rules which governed the way services were to be conducted) includes on various occasions instructions such as:

"procedat minister virgam manu gestans, locum faciens processioni"
["A Minister goes before, bearing a virge in his hand, making room for the procession"],

and

"Imprimis Sacriste, virgas in manibus gestantes, deinde...."
["Firstly Sacrists, bearing virges in their hands, then....."]

We can see from this that at some stage the Sacrists took on a ceremonial role as well as having care of the sacred vessels and vestments, guardianship of the doors and keys of the church, and watchers at the shrines of the saints, and they became one of the acknowledged 'dramatis personae' of the liturgy.

Eventually the virge-bearing Sacristan became known as *Virgarius* [rod-bearer] and thence through English as *Virgifer* [*Virga* in Latin means rod, and *fero* is to bear or carry - as *Crucifer* is to cross-bearer and *Thurifer* is to thurible-bearer], and later variants such as *Virgerer* or the shortened form *Virger* together with the French form *Vergerar* or *Verger*.

Saint Paul's Cathedral in the 13th century had four "Common Servants" or "Virgers" - one appointed by the Dean and three by the Canon Treasurer. None of the Vergers had been perpetuated since 1282 "when a certain manifest crime" had been committed, for which the Virgers were expelled.

Thereafter all four Virgers had to hand their virges to the Dean each Michaelmas, and receive them back for the following year providing that their duties had been performed properly.

During the English Reformation in the sixteenth century many of the mediaeval and "Popish" rites and ceremonies of the Church were seen as superstitious and unnecessary and were abolished or simplified; most of the Minor Orders became redundant.

However, practical servants were still required to attend upon the congregation, keep the buildings secure, clean & lit for Divine Service and the churchyard maintained. In addition, following the abolition of the Latin services and the introduction of English as the language of the Prayer Book, the mostly illiterate population required a layman to lead their part of the service, answer the versicles spoken by the Minister and recite the psalms with him.

And so the office of the present-day Verger is, like the hymn book, both ancient and modern; their duties can include those of several ancient officials, and (depending on the particular needs of each Church) could include care of registers (as Parish Clerk), care of the churchyard (as Sexton), care of the vestry, vestments and vessels (as Sacrist {sacristan} or vesturer), care of the linen, purificators and surplices etc., care of the church clock as well as the ceremonial duties of virge-bearer in procession.

Most have the custody of the Church buildings and their security (as Ostiarius); some are licensed Readers (the mediaeval office of Lector); others are also Altar Servers (as Acolyte) and some are licensed to administer the chalice. Some assist with Pastoral matters, help the Priests with home visits, and take part in Baptism and Confirmation preparations.

The Gatekeepers of the Old Testament would be more than amazed that their modern day counterparts not only look after the articles of the sanctuary, but also often have to operate a "sound system", control intruder and fire alarms and light their "temples" with magical "electric lights".

Chris Crooks

Vesturer

Canterbury Cathedral