
BISHOP GEORGE D. CUMMINS, D.D.

First Bishop and Founder

OF THE

REFORMED EPISCOPAL CHURCH

ON

Ecclesiastical Vestments

Written and Compiled by his Wife

Mrs. A. M. CUMMINS

CORRESPONDENCE.

1317 N. BROAD STREET
PHILADELPHIA, PA., June 9th, 1890.

MRS. A. M. CUMMINS,

DEAR FRIEND:

Since much is being said and written at the present time in the Reformed Episcopal Church as to the Vestments which our clergy should wear, may I intrude upon your time and labor to give me the views of Bishop Cummins, your sainted husband, respecting the use of the Episcopal Robes and the Surplice. I am personally anxious to know his views on the subject of Vestments, and I am sure others will, equally with myself, be influenced by the opinions held by him as the Founder of our beloved Church. Whatever you may write on this subject I should like to have permission to publish, not in the columns of the *Recorder*, but in a circular letter, for private distribution among the clergy and laity of our Church. I have spent, during the past year, not a little time in ascertaining the views of the English Reformers on the Vestments referred to, and I am curious to know whether Bishop Cummins, who founded our Church, arrived at conclusions, in any respect, in line with those which I have been compelled to adopt.

Hoping that the subject will not be uncongenial to you, and that its treatment will not impose too much labor upon you, I beg to assure you of my profoundest esteem, and am

Yours faithfully,

H. S. Hoffman.

June 19, 1890

MY DEAR DR. HOFFMAN:

In answer to your favor of June 9th, in which you wish to know just what Bishop Cummins' views were respecting the use of the Episcopal Robes and Surplice, I beg leave to make the following statement:

From 1846, when he entered the Protestant Episcopal Church, until November, 1873, when he left it, Bishop Cummins used the Surplice to read the Service and black gown to preach in. As a Presbyterian of the Protestant Episcopal Church, he *preferred* the black gown for the entire service; but while in that Church as one of its ministers, he did not refuse to wear the Surplice.

When consecrated a Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church, he was presented with a handsome set of robes by the congregation of Trinity Church, Chicago, and these were always used by him whenever performing the duties of his office. But even while a Protestant Episcopal Bishop he expressed his disapproval of the use of an especial dress set apart for a Bishop.

When the Reformed Episcopal Church was founded, his first direction was that his Episcopal robes should be ripped up, saying to me, "The material may serve for some other use, and that he never wished to wear them again;" the Surplice he *never* wore in the Reformed Episcopal Church. Accordingly the robes were taken apart and packed carefully away. When asked by me, at the time, why he had decided not to use them, he replied, "I earnestly hope no minister or bishop of the Reformed Episcopal Church will ever wear them, as, judging from my own experience, the use of them fosters pride and vanity." Then he added, "whenever I put on those costly and elegant robes I was conscious of a feeling of *superiority* - as though the wearing of such a dress made me occupy a higher position than my brethren in the ministry, and this should never be felt in our own Reformed Episcopal Church."

At another time, in the latter part of the year 1873, he said to a dear friend "One of the foundation stones of the Reformed Episcopal Church must be that Bishops are *not* a separate order of clergy - but only holding an office by which certain work for the Church is to be done; then, why is an especial dress, thus making a difference where none really exists?" "For myself, I *much* prefer the simple black gown as worn by the Reformers in the Swiss and French Churches and also by many of the English Protestants."

At another time, on receiving a letter from a valued friend in New York, Bishop Cummins said, sadly, "The questions of robes will, I fear, give us trouble. The English and Canadian Churches will hardly be willing to give them up; they are more conservative than we are, and yet I feel sure that it would be better for our Church's future welfare *not* to use them. Anything which tends to foster a feeling of supremacy must be avoided, for as ministers, *we are one* in all things, there must be no class distinctions in the Reformed

Episcopal Church."

When Bishop Cummins was about to leave New York for Chicago, to consecrate Dr. Cheney, Bishop, his trunk was packed *but without the robes*. A short time before leaving, a telegram was received from Dr. Cheney asking him most earnestly "*not* to fail in bringing them." On reading the message, Bishop Cummins was greatly troubled and perplexed. Turning to me, he asked, with much feeling, "*What* shall I do?" After much thought and conversation, he decided to take the robes as they were, all in pieces, and settle the question after reaching Chicago. Accordingly, they were taken from the box in which they had been packed and put in his trunk.

On arriving in Chicago, Dr. Cheney, and his friends there, were most earnest in pressing the matter, giving as one very cogent reason - they thought - that if Bishop Cummins did not use them at this, the first consecration of a Bishop in the Reformed Episcopal Church, the Protestant Episcopalians would at once say, *he dared not use them*.

Bishop Cummins yielded to the pressure, *though not for a moment did his own views change*.

The time was most momentous, the Church had not been organized fully, there was a vast amount of work before the little band of Reformers, there had been no time for legislation, and, Bishop Cummins, after seeking wisdom and light from One on whom he ever leaned for guidance, decided that it would not be wise *then* to press his own views and convictions.

As the months passed by, fraught with care and anxiety that few can measure, struggling with failing strength to guide the young Church depending upon him, the shadow of threatening trouble, touching the use or disuse of the robes was felt, as one after another expressed their views, some in favor of them, *many, very strongly opposed*.

To me and to his friends, Bishop Cummins frequently spoke of this matter, and in some of his letters he wrote freely respecting it.

When, in the performance of Episcopal duties in Canada he wore the robes, it was done only in deference to the very urgent request of the members of the Reformed Episcopal Church in the Dominion, but whenever it *was possible* he used only the black silk gown.

Very shortly after the organization of the Reformed Episcopal Church, a lady of Hoosac, New York, presented Bishop Cummins with a handsome black silk gown, which he almost always wore up to the time of his death.

But a short time before he left the Church so dear to him, he said to a friend, "how much I wish all our bishops and ministers would use only the black gown, then there could be not cause for difference." "I fear this question will be the cause of much anxiety and trouble, but we must *all* pray more earnestly, and more constantly for wisdom to guide us, and love to bind us as a unit."

In a conversation held in May, 1876, Bishop Cummins said: "Were the great question of the robes once decided, all ministers coming to us, and all students preparing for our ministry, could have not cause for trouble or perplexity touching this matter, for like the French, Swiss, and German Reformers (as well as some of the English), there would be but one robe or gown for all the clergy alike, and *for* all time."

Very earnestly and hopefully did Bishop Cummins ask for all the members of the Reformed Episcopal Church such a measure of Divine wisdom, and grace as that they might be enabled to settle this most important matter for the entire good of our Church, and for the furtherance of the Gospel of Truth.

Had his life been prolonged, we are very sure that long since the question would have been settled. He would have decided the matter by individual vote.

I would ask the members of the Reformed Episcopal Church, clergy and laity, if they think it possible, or even probable, that Bishop Cummins (if he had been *satisfied* with wearing the Sacerdotal garments of the Priesthood of the Protestant Episcopal Church, and with the doctrines which are the legitimate outcome of such a dress) would have borne the burden of suffering, false charges, the obloquy, loss of cherished friends, position, comfort and ease, to send forth his strong convictions on this and other vital points?

To those who appreciate and sympathize with the work and sacrifices of their Leader and Founder, I would say *be loyal to him* on this most important question. Cast not a shadow on his labors by adopting a custom which *he* disapproved.

Surely no better watchword could be found for the Reformed Episcopal Church, than "*No compromise with Gospel Truth.*"

Soon after the consecration of Dr. Wittingham as Protestant Episcopal Bishop of Maryland, in one of the towns of that State the Surplice was first introduced, but the congregation would not permit its use, and years passed before it was allowed to appear. When, however, its use was introduced, then came the offering up of the alms, the minister turning his back to the people - then the Cross appeared on the Communion Table, after which as a natural sequence the *Altar* was erected. This is a representative case of many others, for now the Protestant Episcopal Church teaches, and accepts substantially, the doctrines of Rome, and adopts in large measure her ritual!

Shall we, *can* we then follow them?

In writing to the Rev. Edward Cridge, of Victoria, British Columbia, under date of May 24th, 1875, in reference to the consecration of Dean Cridge to the Episcopate, at Ottawa, Bishop Cummins uses these words: "The position of a Bishop with us is far different from that which he occupies in the Old Church. We regard him as *not* belonging to a third order divinely instituted, and appointed to rule as a Successor of the Apostles in their office. With us he is simply a *primus inter pares*, a presbyter elected by his brethren to discharge certain duties, as St. Paul committed the like offices to Timothy and Titus. The question

of Vestments has not been mooted among us, and there is diversity in our customs. I have worn the Episcopal robes in Canada in deference to the general sentiment there, but I do not wear them in our own country, *and I think our future Bishops will not wear them.*"

And again, in writing to the Rev. H. M. Collison, then in charge of the Reformed Episcopal Church in Ottawa, Bishop Cummins said: "I have already written to Dean Cridge urging him to come to Ottawa. And now a word with you concerning a matter of moment. When I visited Canada first, in 1874 (September), I wore the Episcopal Robes in deference to the sentiment of the people. You saw at Bishop Nicholson's consecration the Black Gown only was worn. Now, what will the effect be in Ottawa? Will your people yield gracefully? If so, all other portions of Canada will acquiesce. Let me know your views. We must think of England and Ireland too in this matter, as our work will extend there in time. Can we consistently wear the Robes in one country and only the Gown in another? *I think not.*" The Lord guide us in this, by no means a small thing."

Do not these extracts from Bishop Cummins' letters show the aversion which existed in his mind against such ecclesiastical Vestments, and his purpose to create and mature a healthy sentiment which would do away with the use of such Vestments in our Church, which, under the pressure of peculiar circumstances, he was induced to permit and use, but, as the writer knows well, *never, but under protest.*

Foreseeing, as he did so plainly, the harm that must come to the Reformed Episcopal Church through their use, he confidently expressed the opinion that "our future Bishops will *not wear them.*"

Bishop Cummins sought, with his usual wisdom, to influence his English brethren in this matter, believing, as he so fully did, that the use of the Vestments would be particularly antagonistic to the work, which, under God, he had inaugurated.

In conclusion, I quote from a letter written by Bishop Cummins, "May the God of our Fathers give us grace to act wisely in this great crisis. may he enable us to be like minded, of one heart and mind, in the defence of His precious Gospel, and whatever of trial or suffering may be before us, to stand in an *unbroken front, striving TOGETHER for the faith of the Gospel.*"

Hoping, my dear Dr., that this statement, most carefully prepared from notes and letters, may meet your wishes, I am,

Yours sincerely,

A. M. Cummins.

*(Italics are my own)