

THE CATHOLIC WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE SOCIETY.

Signed articles do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Society.

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THE MORAL HEALTH OF THE NATION.

The interest displayed by public spirited men and women, of all classes and creeds, in the moral question is a promising characteristic of this century. It is a healthy sign denoting that the false modesty which made any allusion to the social evil impossible has been broken down. That barrier to reform has been demolished by the modern woman, it is a blessing we owe to the suffrage movement. Too often in the past women were content to leave the subject alone, their part being to stone any sister who had fallen from her high estate, and to be careful that she had no chance of recovering her position. That may sound bitter, but it is a fairly accurate description of the Victorian attitude. The latest sign of the new interest in the moral condition of the State is given us in the report* recently issued by the Committee appointed by the Association for Social and Moral Hygiene to enquire into Sexual Morality. This Committee of Enquiry originated from the desire felt by those, who had been for many years associated in adversely criticising proposed repressive legislation as well as the existing law, to consider:

(1) What existing or proposed legislation they could support; and

(2) Methods other than legislative by which not only individuals, but associations, institutions, and the Government itself might promote sane and healthy sex relations.

Many Societies were represented on the Committee including the Catholic Woman's

Suffrage Society, represented in the first place by Miss Mott and then by Miss Lenn, and the Catholic Social Guild, represented by Dr. H. Ingleby. Monsignor Brown was one of the co-opted members. The Committee met for the first time in October, 1918, and concluded its sittings in June, 1920, the meetings being held as a general rule once a fortnight. The witnesses included medical men and women having special knowledge of venereal disease, magistrates and women police.

The report issued by the Committee is, as one would expect from such a Committee, a very valuable document. One notes with relief in the first place that the Committee do not pin their faith to punitive measures in the suppression of vice, they consider that such legislation has on the contrary increased immorality by taking away the hope and the opportunity of recovery. Indirectly, by providing means of recovery, and by the improvement of general conditions of life, Government can do much. Individual and associated understanding and effort can do more. We are not surprised, therefore, that the Committee recommends that it should be clearly understood and laid down in Police Orders that no person should be arrested for mere solicitation, but only for actually indecent or riotous behaviour, and that they are opposed to any legislation specially aimed at prostitutes as a class. These views will have the hearty support of feminists, who have long advocated such methods of dealing with a great evil.

The Committee realise the need of con-

* The State and Sexual Morality.—George Allen and Unwin 1/6 net.

structive work, and suggest many amendments or changes in the existing laws, mainly with a view to the protection of minors of both sexes. But, they say, so long as legislators and administrators act on no intelligible principle of justice or equality on the one hand, and on no scientific basis of the connection of effects with causes on the other, the panic cry, "For God's sake let us do something—anything!" must be resisted.

The causes of prostitution, they tell us, are manifold—economic, social, political and moral. The causes enumerated include the low rate of women's wages, though in this respect some progress has been made; bad housing, excessive use of alcohol; and the influence of standing armies. While considering that little good can be done by the State as embodied in Parliament and Police, in amending public morals by punitive or coercive measures, the Committee do firmly believe that the State, if it became an association of loving and responsible citizens, could prevent prostitution and sexual promiscuity by personal and concerted measures based on an appreciation of, and a determination to grapple with, the root causes of these evils. Ignorance, self-indulgence and an absence of high ideals are the most serious causes of sexual promiscuity and the most difficult to combat. They can only be met, the report says, by the spread of knowledge and of a high moral standard throughout the community. Like the Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases the Committee advocate that "more careful instruction should be provided in regard to moral conduct, as bearing upon sexual relations, throughout all types and grades of education." Such instruction should include the teaching of a single standard of morals for both sexes, and insistence on the fact that continence for either sex is compatible with health and well being. In the words of the Royal Commission, "such instruction should be based on moral principles and spiritual considerations, and should not be based only on the physical consequences of immoral conduct."

For reasons with which most of our readers will be familiar the Committee oppose the notification of venereal disease, and it is scarcely necessary to say that they are equally opposed to any encouragement being given

by any public authority to the prophylactic policy advocated by the Society for the Prevention of Venereal Disease.

There only remains to say that this valuable report is presented, save for a few reservations, with unanimity. Among the reservations the Catholic members of the Committee disagree with the recommendation that infection in marriage should be a cause for divorce, though they agree that it should be cause for separation, and several members wish the age of consent to be raised to eighteen, whereas the majority of the Committee would have it fixed at seventeen.

The report, which should be read by all interested in the moral welfare of the nation, may be had at the C.W.S.S. Office (55, Berners Street, W.1), price 1/6 (post free 1/8).

L. DE ALBERTI.