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Routine Police Duty

Police Commissioner Valentine is well within his rights in asking members of his force to say whether they are members of the so-called "Christian Front" or of any other outside organization.

The instant a man puts on the blue uniform of a member of the Police Department of the City of New York he gives up his right to privacy in his personal affairs.

He does so when he submits himself, as a condition of his special position as a guardian of life and property, to the discipline of the department. This discipline is necessarily strict because the conduct of a policeman, charged with the enforcement of the law and armed with a revolver, must be held to higher standards than that of employees of other branches of government.

Under the rules of the Department, for example, a policeman can be dismissed from the force for drunkenness even while off duty, for failure to pay his just debts or for unfaithfulness to his wife. These rules have been established and unquestioned for years.

The Charter of the City of New York, moreover, goes even further. It specifically prohibits policemen from contributing money to a political fund and from joining any political club. It even forbids a policeman from joining any Federal or State military organization.

Obviously, the intent of these limitations upon the activities of the policeman are to make certain that he will conduct himself so as to preserve public confidence in the department, so that he will be available when needed and so that he may perform his duties without bias or prejudice.

The activities of the "Christian Front" lately have stirred considerable public excitement. Some of the members have been arrested, charged with subversive activities. Statements have been made that some policemen have been members.

In view of all the circumstances, the Police Commissioner naturally wished to know the truth. He put the question to the men themselves. They should answer as a matter of routine duty.

No policeman's constitutional right is threatened. It would not be threatened even if the Police Department adopted a rule forbidding membership in the "Christian Front."

The late Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, upholding the right of a police department to bar its members from political activity, made the distinction clear. He said: "The petitioner may have a constitutional right to talk politics, but he has no constitutional right to be a policeman."