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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

ART. II.—SOME ASPECTS OF THE CONFESSIONAL.

THIS article is written just as the Round Table Conference held at Fulham has completed its deliberations; it does not, therefore, pretend in any way to consider or discuss the proceedings of that Conference. There is no material, save purely confidential statements or utterly unreliable gossip, for any such treatment. We can well afford to wait for the official report of the proceedings. But the published scheme laid before the members by the Bishop of London suggests some considerations which, even in the absence of that report, may well be taken note of. The subject was outlined for discussion as follows:

“1. The Meaning of our Lord’s words (in John xx. 22, 23; Matt. xviii. 18) and their use in the Ordinal, as affecting the conception of the Priesthood.

“2. The Practice of the Church—

“ (a) In Primitive Times.

“ (b) In the Middle Ages.

“3. The Meaning of the Anglican Formularies and the Limits of Doctrine and Practice which they allow.

“4. Practical Considerations.”¹

It will be agreed that the lines of inquiry here laid down were wise and proper, but, unhappily, the time at the disposal of the Conference amounted only to four sessions. Within that limit it is scarcely possible that all the lines of inquiry submitted should have received anything like full and adequate attention. It may be remembered that the prior Conference, although it sat longer, was unable to do more than glance at the latter half of the subject laid before it; and it may have been that the recent gathering found itself in the same plight. In that case the latter part of the subject is likely to have received less attention than it called for.

Under the circumstances there may be an advantage in directing attention to some practical considerations as to the teaching about Confession and Absolution now prevalent in the Church of England, especially such teaching as is addressed rather to the general public than to the clergy alone, to the simple rather than the learned, and, as to much of it, primarily to children. Possibly some evidence and a few comments suggested by it may be of use to Churchmen in giving their earnest attention to the report of the Conference when it sees the light.

I. It may be well first to note the interpretation now put by many High Churchmen, who might not be included in

¹ *Guardian*, January 1, 1902.

the more extreme wing of the party, upon the Prayer-Book references to Confession under special circumstances. It is a sign that the practice of resorting regularly to the Confessional has reached quarters hitherto little affected by it. Perhaps a good example of this may be found in the volume on "Confirmation," by the Bishop of Vermont, in the new "Oxford Library of Practical Theology," a series meant for the use of the devout laity. In the main the volume is not of the very extreme type, but Bishop Hall says:

"While no priest has a right to require a special confession, or to press it as an obligation, this privilege should be plainly put before candidates for Confirmation, with reference both to their immediate preparation and to subsequent needs that may arise in their life."

"We all have our individual doubts and perplexities to be solved, our sorrows to be borne, difficulties to be overcome, temptations to be wrestled with, sins to be repented of, and (thank God!) our aspirations and yearnings to be realized. Most of us from time to time need the help of encouragement, sympathy, or counsel in these varied experiences of life. All should feel assured, certainly not least the young Christian in the early stages of a religious life, that they can turn with confidence and naturalness to their spiritual pastor for such help as they may need and desire. Many a young man, who has thought his temptations and sins quite exceptional, might have been saved from despair and recklessness if only he had 'opened his grief' to some wise and sympathetic friend (who so natural a counsellor as his clergyman?) who could 'bear gently with the ignorant and erring, for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity'"¹ (pp. 122, 123).

This passage is fairly typical. The attitude taken up by the Bishop is already that of many who can hardly be classed with the most ardent Neo-Anglicans. The passage appears, however, to encourage a habit of more or less regular resort to the Confessional. Confession is to become, not a rare and exceptional, but possibly a frequent act; not a medicine, but a regularly taken food or stimulant. And if this is to be so, there must be provision for it. Accordingly the clergy are advised to make their preparations. As an example, let us take the suggestion offered to the clergy by the Rev. Percy Dearmer in his recent manual, "The Parson's Handbook." In some "Notes on the Seasons," under Christmas Eve, he says:

¹ Heb. v. 2.

“Care should be taken that this service does not interfere with the opportunities of those who wish to make their confessions. A paper on the notice-board, giving the hours at which the clergy can be seen and their initials, will be a great help to timid people; and the clergy should put on their surplices and stoles, and sit in readiness at such hours. The form for giving absolution after private confession is provided by the Prayer-Book in the office for the Visitation of the Sick. This form must be intended to be used at other occasions; for no other is provided for those who seek absolution in response to the Exhortation in the Communion Office” (p. 203).

I need not stop to discuss the strained and rather illogical inference as to the form of Absolution. It is enough to note that here there is no talk of special need; it is the Church's season, not the individual's condition, which is uppermost. The arrangement which Mr. Dearmer suggests for Christmas Eve is one which in some churches prevails continuously throughout the year. We have churches in which Confessional-boxes are as conspicuous as in Roman Catholic churches; churches where public notice is always accessible as to the hours at which confessions are heard; and, apparently, churches at which peripatetic spiritual directors meet penitents from all parts who have been informed by advertisement of the fixtures.

These developments of the policy represented by Bishop Hall, of Vermont, have, of course, a distinct doctrinal basis. Penance is claimed as a Sacrament, and as a Sacrament of the Gospel. Mr. Vernon Staley's familiar little volume, “The Catholic Religion,” will supply a specimen of this teaching as offered to the general body of Church-people. Mr. Staley says that “Our Lord's authority can be traced directly for the institution [as a Sacrament] of . . . Penance” (6th edit., p. 256). Explaining that repentance has three parts—contrition, confession, amendment—he says:

“Contrition leads naturally to confession, or the truthful acknowledgment of sin. Confession is self-accusation, and the acknowledgment of wrong-doing to God. God demands confession as a condition of pardon. ‘If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.’¹ A willingness to confess is an evidence of contrition. The most searching confession is that made privately before a priest” (p. 292).

“It is only upon such private confession that the soul

¹ 1 John i. 9.

can receive the direct assurance of pardon which Christ Jesus empowers the priest to pronounce" (p. 292).

"Our Blessed Lord has given His priests power and authority to absolve from all sins, and He surely meant them to use that power. But before they can fully do so, it is needful that those seeking absolution should confess their sins. Thus we may be quite sure that private confession, as an outcome of real contrition, is a practice well pleasing to our Lord"¹ (p. 294).

Here, again, there is no talk of any special need, but of habitual resort, because Confession and Absolution are the only channels through which normally pardon is to be obtained.

Here is the way in which the same doctrine is conveyed by the widely disseminated St. Bartholomew's Church Tracts (No. 9, "Are Your Sins Forgiven?"):

"But do you mean to say that we can't be forgiven in any other way except by the Absolution of the Priest? Well, I haven't said anything of the sort, have I? Almighty God can forgive in any way that pleases Him, of course. What I have been saying is that it has pleased God to give to certain men the power to forgive the sins of penitent sinners in His Name. I say that Absolution is the appointed remedy for deadly sins committed after Baptism. That the words of Absolution are a means whereby we receive forgiveness, and a pledge to assure us thereof. And if you do not know this you have not heard the full Gospel" (p. 8).

We may note in passing that the encouragement of resort as a regular habit to the Confessional seems in conflict with the teaching of some, at least, amongst the leaders of the Oxford Movement. The late Canon Carter, of Clewer, in his "Doctrine of Confession in the Church of England," says:

"Confession is essentially the exceptional and remedial element of Christianity. The Holy Eucharist, prayer and self-discipline, teaching and divine illuminations, are the proper rule, and ought to be the sufficient food of the life of the Baptized. Their intended effect is to refresh and strengthen, increase and perfect, by a progressive advance, the regenerate nature in its eventful course, till it attain its consummation of bliss in conscious union with God in Christ. More ought not to be needed. But because such grace is often hindered, or may decay, or even be lost, the remedial ordinances are given to renew the faded, or debilitated, or departed life" (p. 231).

¹ See Dr. Pusey's "Statement on Sacramental Confession," p. 385, etc.

So also Canon Carter seems to have been accustomed—at all events in his prime—to lay stress upon the distinction between the Roman Church and the English Church (as he read her formularies) in the matter of Confession. Thus, in the preface to the second edition of his manual on “The Doctrine of Confession in the Church of England,” he meets in this way some objections of the *Quarterly* reviewer based on the custom of the Roman Church. The rule of the one Church, he says, is “compulsory,” but “our system . . . is voluntary” (pp. viii, ix), and the distinction is called “vital.” In truth, the distinction is a broad and serious one; but the teaching mainly followed now does not seem to admit its existence.

In regard especially to children, the modern method rather follows Pusey’s advice, who, referring to the dictum of the Council of Trent on another point, says that “the ordinary and right custom among the faithful is to bring their children to Confession from the time they are seven years old, and it is a great negligence in parents to omit doing so” (“Advice on Hearing Confession,” p. 159). With this agrees the teaching which appears to make Confession a necessary preliminary to Confirmation and first Communion. How far this is actually insisted on one must hesitate to say; but the evidence of the manuals shows that it is at least regarded as the ideal course. This is very plainly stated in the tract, “Confession in the Church of England,” by the Rev. J. P. F. Davidson:

“As a matter of fact, there are so many topics of necessary spiritual guidance on which parents either do not or cannot speak, that of all Confessions none have been more fruitful in blessed results than those of children, both boys and girls. For, at that age, the tendencies to sin are growing unconsciously, the dangers of the world are unsuspected. And there is nothing, I feel sure, of graver spiritual moment—and this assurance is corroborated by all experience—than to check in the bud all such evils before they have grown too strong for control by gentle warnings and tender guidance and advice. This has been so repeatedly forced upon me that in Confirmation classes I have found it necessary to insist on Self-examination as one part of the instruction. A few simple and testing questions are drawn up on the Three Baptismal Vows. These are read out to the children in the Church. They are taken home where parents, if they will, may see them. And the answers are read privately to the priest by each child kneeling in the presence of God, as the simple and natural Confession of the young life. The necessity of this has come

home to me in the startling fact, that you may often find deadly sin upon the conscience even at that tender age. And if we believe that the Holy Ghost is given in Confirmation, surely it is the bounden duty of every priest, by every means in his power, to see that no child is presented in that state, with sin unconfessed and unabsolved, slurred over instead of repented of, to receive that Holy and Awful Gift" (pp. 12, 13).

The children's manuals have been so often quoted that I need not reproduce their way of putting the doctrine of Penance. They show, however, that children are taught to believe that Confession to a priest, followed by Absolution, is the normal way in which pardon for sin may be obtained; they are enjoined to go to Confession before their first Communion, which doubtless implies readiness to go to Confession as a condition of being confirmed, and they are encouraged to make after-resort to the Confessional a regular habit.

II. A practical consideration which arises in every discussion of the Confessional is the difference between mortal and venial sin. It is a distinction about which it would seem that even children should have very clear views. According to "A Little Catechism for Little Catholics," which is amongst the most widely used of the extreme Anglican manuals, one of the "Three chief Precepts of the Church" is "to go to Confession at Easter, and *whenever we are in mortal sin.*" But the popular literature of the school is far from explicit in its guidance as to the distinction suggested. Mr. Vernon Staley in "The Catholic Religion" says:

"A venial sin is as the cooling of friendship, a deadly sin is as the breaking of friendship between the soul and God. Venial sin is more of the nature of an infirmity, whilst in deadly sin there is an element of wilfulness" (p. 224).

The little manual, "Pardon for the Penitent," offers only this guidance:

"It is well . . . to go to Confession whenever we have fallen into any grievous or mortal sin. Mortal sin means deadly sin which destroys the life of God in the soul" (p. 4).

It will probably be agreed that this definition is worthless, and can convey nothing clearly to simple minds.

Does anybody marvel at the inadequacy of these definitions? He will hardly marvel if he remembers that the distinction between venial sins and mortal sins has been one of the standing difficulties of the Confessional since first it grew into power. The position is a most curious one, for—

1. The distinction is insisted on. And yet—

2. There is no authoritative guidance either for the Roman or for the Anglican Confessor.

The Council of Trent throws little or no light on the subject; the Tridentine Catechism for the guidance of clergy refrains from definition. The medieval doctors held that a Confessor was not expected to decide between venials and mortals; and yet the Roman Church—followed by the Anglican teachers, so far as we have seen them—virtually compel him to do so. The amount of controversial literature on the subject, and the contradictory character of the positions assumed is enough to turn the brain of any young Anglican priest anxious to see his way plainly.¹

Now, it cannot be suggested that the distinction laid down is of no importance. Controversy of quite another kind forbids us to entertain any such view. Do we not know that it is just upon this question of venial sin that some other persons, very far indeed from the Roman Church, have fallen into grievous peril? Has it not been through a habit of drawing and justifying distinctions of this kind that some teachers have fallen into gross Antinomianism?

Who and what are to be the guides of English Confessors in this matter? The clergy who sit to hear Confessions have, be it remembered, to act in a judicial capacity, to decide the most intimate and perplexing questions, to give judgment on things, many of which must be and should be utterly beyond all personal experience of their own. If they follow Pusey, they will go straight to the Roman casuistical literature, to the guidance of the canonized Liguori, and to like unlovely sources. Let me quote here from a little volume on "Sacramental Confession," by the late Dean Howson, published in 1874. He said:

"I was once walking in Switzerland from one village to another with a priest, when our conversation fell upon the Confessional. I said to him that I thought this system, based as it is upon the distinction between mortal and venial sin, is both cruel and deceiving. 'Yes,' he said, with a shrug of the shoulders; 'and no one can draw the line between mortal and venial sin.' Then he added with another shrug, '*The Casuists can.*' On this I asked him what real effect resulted from the training of the Clergy on the casuistical method of moral theology. He answered, 'It is the destruction of all religion.' I ought to add that this man was at that time surrounded by the respect of his parishioners, and that he himself had been a professor in an ecclesiastical seminary.

¹ *Vide* H. C. Lea, "Auricular Confession and Indulgences," ii. 259.

“For the sake of elucidating, to those who have hot studied this subject, some characteristics of this system, I will state a case which by others will be recognised as familiar. Here is half a crown on a table. I desire to possess it, though it is not mine; and, no one seeing me, I appropriate it, or, in the plain honest language of the English people, I steal it. Now, is this a mortal or a venial sin? ‘Here,’ say the Casuists, ‘we must distinguish; we must take into account to whom the half-crown belonged.’ So far as I can make out from Liguori,¹ whose moral theology is at present in very high honour and officially approved, the sin in his view would be mortal if the coin were stolen from a beggar, but venial if it were stolen from a rich nobleman. Various opinions, however, on such a subject would be considered *probable*;² and yet we are concerned here with the tremendous distinction between mortal and venial sin, between eternal separation from God and the temporary loss of His favour.

“Now I say that a compulsory Confessional system based on such principles, or rather such absence of principle, may easily cause distress of mind when there ought to be peace and joy, or may produce the belief that we have been forgiven when there has been no true repentance at all; while in every case it puts a fearful power into the hands of a fallible priest in a matter really belonging to the transactions of the human soul with a Merciful Father, through a sufficient Saviour, in the strength of the Holy Ghost” (pp. 35-37).

This, then, is a practical difficulty to which we may hope that the Conference gave due attention.

III. Closely connected with it is another, the question of Direction. Pusey, indeed, argued that it was hardly the business of the Confessor to give direction; but this is a contention which cannot well be sustained. Certainly the Roman precedent is clear enough on this point. The Confessor is to decide what is best for the spiritual interests of the penitent. The Confessor must be obeyed; he may become

¹ Prebendary Meyrick’s “Moral and Devotional Theology of the Church of Rome, according to the Authoritative Teaching of S. Alfonso de’ Liguori,” published in 1857, ought to be well known and carefully studied. In one diocese at least of our sister Church in America, I observe that it is made a text-book for theological students.—Howson.

² To the fifth and tenth of Pascal’s famous Provincial Letters, which exposed the immoral consequence of the Jesuit doctrine of Probabilities, should now be added the sixth chapter of Professor Huber’s recent “Order of the Jesuits” (Berlin, 1873).—Howson.

the despot of the family, and rebellion against him may be punished by the refusal of Absolution—a virtual condemnation (as the penitent must believe) to the pains of hell. The Roman doctors insist so fully on the blind submission of the devotee to the decision of the priest that we ought to have some more definite understanding as to the extent to which this authority is admitted and followed in the English Church. Of the evils into which it has led and must lead it is unnecessary to speak.

IV. Finally, as an insignificant detail, and yet one which is not without a certain eloquence of its own, we may fairly note the connection in which this teaching of the Confessional is found. It will be remembered that the body of English clergy from whom it comes in our Church is constantly, almost regularly, providing recruits for the Church of Rome. The advocacy of the Confessional goes with significant adherence to the exposition of other doctrines, neither Catholic nor primitive, and therefore not admitted by our own Church. Thus, the position assigned to the Virgin Mary and the Saints, and the appeal to them for intercession cannot be ignored. The common form of Confession seems to begin thus: "I confess to Almighty God, to Blessed Mary ever Virgin, to all Saints, and to you, my father;" and to end thus: "Wherefore I beg Blessed Mary, all Saints, and you, my father, to pray to the Lord our God for me." That is the form given in "Catholic Prayers for Church of England People" (edited by A. H. S.), where "How to Make a Good Confession" immediately and very significantly precedes the chapter on the Mass. In this volume the curious may find "Devotions to our Blessed Lady," "Vespers of our Blessed Lady," "Rosary of the Blessed Virgin," "Litany of the Blessed Virgin," and other Roman devotions. *Noscitur a sociis.*

A. R. BUCKLAND.



ART. III.—THE AUTONOMY OF THE CHURCH OF IRELAND.

THE isolation of the Church of Ireland has recently been the subject of a very important debate within the walls of Trinity College, Dublin, but that insularity was merely discussed from the standpoint of a certain small but clamorous party in the Church of England. So far as adoration of Christ in the Sacrament, non-communicating attendance, the