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CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION.

BY THE REV. A. W. PARSONS, L.T.H., Vicar of Holy Trinity,
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NO subject can be more important than this: How may a sinner be freed from the burden of his sins and be so restored to the consciousness of communion with God that he is encouraged to live a truly Christian life? It is important not only because on a right answer depends the spiritual happiness of the individual, but also the peace and purity of the family and the honour and well-being of the Church and Nation.

There are three kinds of confession. The first and most important is confession to God alone. The second is confession to a fellow-creature, whether a clergyman, a layman, or even a woman, for the purpose of acknowledging that we have injured the party to whom we confess; or, if not for that reason, then to obtain spiritual help and advice from him or her to whom we confess. Both these kinds of confession are scriptural. But there is a third kind—the auricular confession of the Church of Rome. This confession must be made to a priest only; it must be secret, for no third party can be present to hear the confession, and it must be full. Every so-called “mortal” sin of thought, word and deed which the penitent can remember, even those of a most horrible and degrading character, must be told; and further, the confession must be made with a view to receiving from the priest pardon or absolution—that is, remission of the punishment due to sin by the law of God.

Now I do believe in confession to a priest. But my Confessor is the great High Priest of our profession, the Lord Jesus Christ. “If we say that we have no sins we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John i. 8, 9). Who is the best priest to whom one should confess—Jesus Christ or some earthly one? Surely if the text I have quoted be true it must be wrong to confess to Jesus Christ and then insult Him by turning to another priest, as though the Saviour Who in His great love died for us were not sufficient? Besides, our Saviour is always, so to speak, in the Confessional. Wherever we are this loving Priest is always with His own people, ready and willing to hear our confessions.

“I need no human ear
In which to pour my prayer;
My great High Priest is always near,
On Him I cast my care—
To Him, Him only, I confess,
Who can alone absolve and bless.”

In harmony with this, our Church substituted the General Confession to God in Morning and Evening Prayer for private

confession to a priest, and the public absolution which follows was put in the place of private absolution. Our Church directs intending communicants to "examine themselves" and to "confess themselves to Almighty God" (Exhortation before Holy Communion); it advises the perplexed soul "to open his grief" to a discreet and learned minister of God's Word "that by the ministry of God's holy Word he may receive the benefit of Absolution" and Spiritual Counsel—an entirely different thing from auricular confession. The confession which it recommends in the Service for the Visitation of the Sick is only for a sick person troubled by some weighty matter; it need not be private, and it has nothing to do with the practice of secretly retailing sins to a priest by those who are in ordinary health. Moreover, according to Canon 67 no man who is a preacher need use this service, but shall instruct and comfort the sick as he shall "think most needful and convenient." Besides, as the late Dr. Griffith Thomas says in his recently published work, *The Principles of Theology*:

"The prayer for forgiveness significantly follows the pronouncement of the absolution. All this is totally different from the teaching and practice of the Roman Church, which compels auricular confession as a practice flowing out of the Sacrament of Penance. In the Church of Rome absolution is described by the word *judicium*, while with us we have its equivalent in *beneficium* by the ministration of God's Word."

Recently I found myself involved in a controversy in the *Leicester Mail* arising out of an address I gave in one of our Leicester Churches at the invitation of its Vicar. I was vehemently attacked by an anonymous writer called "Crux." In his first letter he wrote:

"Mr. Parsons knows that when he was ordained a priest, the Bishop laid his hands on his head with these words: 'Receive the Holy Ghost for the office and work of a priest in the Church of God now committed unto thee by the imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain they are retained.'"

These latter words he quoted twice in one short letter. They are from John xx. 23. They cannot have a different meaning in the Prayer Book to what they have in the Bible. But people like "Crux" always think of them as implying that the priest at ordination is made a judge in the penitential tribunal, invested with power to forgive sins, and that as a consequence secret confession should be made to him. As we see, however, by comparing St. John's account with that in Luke xxiv. 33, the words were spoken to the whole company of believers, and they were a commission to proclaim publicly and authoritatively God's conditions of pardon. "Whatever the words mean," says Bishop Westcott in his *Commentary*, "they must be regarded as the commission of the Christian Society and not as that of the Christian Ministry." The Fulham Conference (1903) with the present Lord Bishop of London in the chair unanimously took this view. Further, as I reminded "Crux," these words are not found in any Ordinal for the first twelve hundred years, and even then were no essential part of the words of ordination. They are not found in any Greek Ordinal to-day. That is, they are no

ancient, catholic or necessary part of whatever is conferred in the ordination of priests. Furthermore, how did the Apostles understand our Lord's Commission? We search the New Testament in vain for any teaching about the Confessional. The Apostles remitted and retained sins by preaching the Gospel. See Acts x. 42, 43; xiii. 38, 39; Luke xxiv. 45-47. The fact is that in the whole Bible there cannot be found one single passage enjoining the practice of auricular confession to a priest.

Again, in the New Testament the Christian Minister, as such, is never called a sacerdos or priest. He is called a bishop, a presbyter, an elder in the Church of God; but never a priest. And where is he bidden to hear confessions or to pronounce a solemn absolution? His office is to preach the word. He is told that he must be watchful and do the work of an Evangelist and make full proof of his ministry. Bishop Gore has admitted in *The Church and the Ministry* that sacerdotal terms are only found connected with the ministry at the end of the second century.

Auricular confession was made compulsory for the first time in 763.¹ The system of penance as it now exists in the Church of Rome was not formulated until the Fourth Council of Lateran, 1215. It seems but truth to say with Canon Meyrick: "These assumptions of the medieval priesthood, ignorantly acquiesced in, laid the layman a slave at the foot of the priest." In this matter the Church of Rome's own champions are against her. Bellarmine says: "The secret confession of all our sins is not only not instituted or commanded *Jure Divino*, by God's law, but it was not so much as received into use in the ancient church of God."²

The first writer to defend formally the judicial form of absolution was the celebrated Thomas Aquinas (1227-74) in his short work, *De Forma Absolutionis*. That at this time the practice was a novel one is clear from the account Aquinas himself gives of a certain learned man who found fault with it on the ground that up to within thirty years of his writing—that is, about the year 1220—the only form used by the priests and known to the objector was the deprecatory one—that is, prayer. (Almighty God, give thee remission and forgiveness.) In one of his replies to me "Crux" quoted, as other Anglo-Catholics have quoted, some words from the Apostolic Constitutions of the fourth century. They are introduced in this ingenuous way.

"I turn now to Mr. Parsons' statement [which may be *verbally* correct] that the words 'whose sins ye forgive,' etc., were not said to the priest for the first twelve hundred years of the Church's history. . . . What he does not tell us, however, is that a form, not verbally the same, but exactly similar in purport, is put in the mouth of the consecrating Bishop in the Apostolic Constitutions. 'Grant him [the priest], O Lord, by Thy Christ, the fulness of Thy Spirit that he may have power to pardon sins according to Thy command, that he may loose every bond that binds sinners by reason of the power which Thou hast granted to Thine Apostles.'"

I replied that this was an example of precatory absolution and that if he would read the Apostolic Constitutions he would find it

¹ Fleury, *Ecc. Hist.*, Vol. 13, p. 390.

² *De Perit*, lib. 3; c. 1.

stated that the Bishop himself absolved only by prayer and the laying on of hands. I stated that no verbal absolution but that of prayer is known to have been preserved from the early centuries.

I also pointed out that it was not fair to ignore my argument that the words he quoted to prove that I was commissioned at my ordination to hear auricular confessions were not included in any Ordinal for twelve centuries.

“ If the words are understood as I understand them, there is no difficulty. But if the words quoted (John xx. 23) confer the right to forgive sins judicially, then for 1,200 years the Church ordained her priests without conferring this power upon them.”

The argument is quite simple and must be faced by anyone who holds Anglo- or Roman Catholic views. It was certainly not argument to say that what I stated was verbally correct, and then proceed to say that because the words were said at my ordination I must accept “ Crux’s ” view of them. It is this intolerance of the opinions of one’s fellow-Churchmen which has led to the present unpopularity of Anglo-Catholicism in spite of the splendid and devoted work done by some Anglo-Catholic priests.

Finally, I gave my own view of the place of my ministry with regard to this matter in the words of the *Homily of Repentance* :

“ I do not say but that if any find themselves troubled in conscience, they may repair to their learned curate or pastor, or to some other godly, learned man, and show the trouble and doubt of their conscience to them, that they may receive at their hand the comfortable salve of God’s Word ; but it is against the true Christian liberty that any man should be bound to the numbering of his sins, as it hath been used heretofore in the time of blindness or ignorance.”

I also quoted these words from the same source : “ It is most evident and plain that this auricular confession hath not the warrant of God’s Word.” In reply, “ Crux ” threw over the Homilies and referred to them as a volume of sixteenth-century sermons. He asked me whether I accepted all the statements of doctrine in the Homilies. My reply was that I accept them as an authoritative standard of doctrine in the Church of England and that that was why I quoted them. The 80th Canon, which is still in force, orders a copy of these Homilies to be provided in every parish church. The second rubric after the Nicene Creed still says : “ Then shall follow the Sermon, or one of the Homilies already set forth, or hereafter to be set forth, by authority.” The attempt to prove that the Homilies are of no doctrinal value is one of the outstanding failures of the Modern Anglo-Catholic movement. Even Dr. Newman admitted in the famous Tract 90 that “ they are of authority so far as they bring out the sense of the Articles and are not of authority when they do not.” The least that can be said of the Homilies is that they are of more authority than any sermons preached by particular clergymen, seeing they are the Church’s own sermons showing how the facts and truths of the Gospel are to be brought home to the consciences of men. But, of course, even their statements are to be

brought to the test of God's Word, seeing that: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is the cause of an error" (Homily 1).

In conclusion, it is worth noting that our English Ordinal does more than quote the words from John xx. 23. It adds to it the words: "And be thou a faithful dispenser of the Word of God and of His Holy Sacraments." If we are to interpret all the words of authoritative commission we may do so by a reference to the exhortation which precedes it in the service, and we shall then see at once that priests in the Church of England exercise their functions by being "Messengers, Watchmen and Stewards of the Lord," by teaching, premonishing, feeding and providing for the Lord's family, and the manner of compassing the doing of so weighty a work is with doctrine and exhortation taken out of the Holy Scriptures and with a life agreeable to the same. The interpretation imposed upon the words: "Whosoever sins ye remit," is in no way qualified by any reference to a tribunal of penance or even by a remote suggestion of judicial authority exercised therein by the accredited pastor. My own deep and personal conviction is that the modern attempt to revive the Confessional is the most perilous of the developments of the mediæval reaction which has so largely obscured scriptural truth in our land. There is no authority whatever in the Word of God or in the Prayer Book for auricular confession and priestly absolution of a judicial kind. And as the *Homily of Repentance*, Part 2, says:

"We ought to acknowledge none other priest for deliverance from our sins but our Saviour Jesus Christ; Who, being our Sovereign Bishop, doth with the sacrifice of His body and blood, offered once for ever on the altar of the Cross, most effectually cleanse the spiritual leprosy, and wash away the sins of all those that with true confession of the same do flee unto Him. It is most evident and plain that this auricular confession hath not the warrant of God's Word."

In an open Bible and a fully proclaimed Saviour there is still resident that Divine power with which the newly Crucified in His Risen Might invested the cowering company to whom He addressed the words. It is along this line that our own beloved Church must find "The Way of Renewal."

The second edition of *Principles of Theology*, by the Rev. W. H. Griffith Thomas, D.D., completing 4,000 copies, is now ready, price 12s. 6d. It is particularly encouraging to find that the first edition of this important work should have been sold out in the short space of twelve weeks and that there is every indication that the demand will continue. The new edition contains a slightly more complete index, but beyond the correction of some printers' errors, the text remains the same.
