

THE PRAYER-BOOK AND CONFESSION.

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OVER each man ordained a priest in the Church of England are said the words : " Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven : and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained." What do they mean ? They are of course taken from St. John xx. 23 : " Whose soever sins ye forgive, they are forgiven unto them : whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained "—addressed to " the disciples " on the evening of the first Easter Day, when, according to St. Luke xxiv. 33, others were present than ten of the Apostles. I need not, however, labour the point, for at the Fulham Conference of 1901 on " Confession and Absolution " the members were agreed that the words " are not to be regarded as addressed only to the Apostles or the Clergy, but as a commission to the whole Church." The Conference included such men as the Rev. R. M. Benson, of the Society of St. John Cowley, Canon Body, the Rev. V. S. S. Coles, Principal of Pusey House, Lord Halifax, and Canon A. J. Mason.

Further, as was the case with various sayings of our Lord, the commission was expressed in a broad and unqualified form ; but the conditions are no doubt implied in the preceding sentences—" As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you. . . . Receive ye the Holy Ghost." The forgiveness and retention of sins must be guided by the spirit of Christ and the principles of His mission ; for all are agreed on the necessity of faith and repentance as the conditions of forgiveness ; and even those whose language seems to encroach upon the divine prerogative do not deny in theory that it is God alone who can grant the divine forgiveness of sins. These words from the fourth Gospel correspond to the parting commission as recorded by St. Luke that " repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name unto all the nations." The Church was empowered to bring home to people the great message of the forgiveness of sins in such an authoritative way that they might be fully assured of it and receive peace and strength. When, therefore, the Church in the name of Christ declares that the sins of the faithful penitent are forgiven, that is true, they are forgiven, though no absolution really alters the state of anyone before God ; and when it condemns the sins of the wilfully impenitent and declares that their sins remain and continue to separate them from God, that also is true, they are retained. It is a general commission to exercise the ministry of reconciliation ; and a unanimous agreement was reached at the Fulham Conference that Our Lord's words conveyed " a summary of the message " with which the Church is charged. Further, the New Testament and early Christian history record how the commission was carried out ; for we see the Church, mainly through its officers as mouthpieces and representatives, proclaiming the fact

and terms of divine forgiveness, condemning the sins of the impenitent, administering the Sacraments, and exercising discipline. The Apostles never claimed to forgive or retain sins against God: they declared God's forgiveness of the penitent: Sermons, Baptism and the Holy Communion were general Absolutions. But in regard to the Christian society, the Church forgave and retained sins in a literal and absolute sense: it exercised discipline over its members; it excommunicated and then restored offenders after any great transgression, first retaining and then forgiving.

We come now to the formula in the Ordering of Priests:

"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. And be thou a faithful dispenser of the Word of God and of His holy Sacraments."

The insertion of our Lord's words is a solemn declaration of the Church that those ordained are thereby entrusted with the office and ministry of reconciliation; and though they cannot mean more here than they did from our Lord's lips on the first Easter night, by the change from the plural number to the singular ("thou" instead of "ye") the responsibility of each man is emphasised as well as the greatness of his ministry. But the interesting point is that these words are not found in any form for the Ordination of priests in the first thousand years: they are not part of the Ordinal of the Orthodox Church: in the Sarum Pontifical they were pronounced, as they are in the Roman, later in the service after the Ordination; and so they cannot be regarded as an essential part of Ordination. Yet they were not only retained in our Ordinal, but made part of the actual Ordination formula. Whether the Reformers were aware or not that they were preserving a novelty of the Middle Ages, they undoubtedly inserted the words because they are Scriptural; and it is clear, as Dr. Drury has shown in his book, *Confession and Absolution*, that they understood them in their primitive sense. Moreover, Anglican divines have carefully distinguished between the ministerial absolution which the Church can give and the forgiveness which God alone bestows. The great Elizabethan, Hooker, asked concerning absolution: "Doth it really take away sin, or but ascertain us of God's most gracious and merciful pardon?" He has no hesitation as to the answer: "The latter of which two is our assertion, the former theirs" (i.e. the Romans);¹ and Jeremy Taylor, the casuist and Laudian, summed up as follows: "Either the sinner hath repented worthily or he hath not. If he hath, then God hath pardoned him already. . . . If he hath not repented worthily, the priest . . . can by this absolution effect no new thing. The work is done before the priestly absolution, and therefore cannot depend upon it."² The fact, however, remains that the Ordination formula is difficult for people to understand and is very liable to misinterpretation; and the American Church provides an alternative form.

¹ *Eccles. Pol.*, VI, ch. vi, 4.

² *Works*, vii, 459 (Eden).

In the Book of Common Prayer the assurance of the divine forgiveness is given to the penitent particularly through the Absolutions pronounced at Morning and Evening Prayer and at the Holy Communion. The former clearly states that it is God who pardons and absolves, and emphasis is laid on the power of His ministers to declare to penitent believers the absolution and remission of their sins. At the Holy Communion the Absolution is after the primitive manner in the form of a prayer for forgiveness; an added dignity is attached to it by the requirement that it is to be pronounced by the Bishop (of the diocese) if present; and it is followed immediately by the Comfortable Words, an arrangement which agrees with the statement in the first Exhortation that "by the ministry of God's holy Word, he may receive the benefit of absolution" and also with the Homily on Repentance where "the benefit of absolution" is described as "the comfortable salve of God's Word." The same Absolution appears again in "Forms of Prayer to be used at sea," when there is imminent danger.

But provision is also made for two exceptional cases requiring special treatment. In the first Exhortation of the Communion Service reference is made to those who cannot come to the Holy Communion with a quiet conscience. It carefully explains the normal way of coming worthily, namely by self-examination, bewailing of sinfulness, confession to Almighty God, full purpose of amendment, reconciliation with and restitution, if necessary, to and a readiness to forgive others. But where the foregoing is insufficient, a special method is indicated; and in 1662 additional emphasis was laid on the exceptional character of the provision, because there was added the paragraph which begins: "If any of you be a blasphemer of God, an hinderer or slanderer of His Word, an adulterer, or be in malice or envy, or in any other grievous crime," etc. Then follows the invitation to any who "cannot quiet his own conscience," but "requireth further comfort or counsel" to come to a "discreet and learned minister of God's Word and open his grief, that by the ministry of God's holy Word he may receive the benefit of Absolution together with ghostly counsel and advice, to the quieting of his conscience and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness." There are two things to be noted here. The Prayer-Book provides no form of Absolution for use in such cases. In the first Prayer-Book of Edward VI the Absolution in the Visitation of the Sick was ordered to be used in all private confessions, but in and since 1552 that order was withdrawn. There is no fixed method or form; and so, for example, Bishop Chavasse said of the very many confessions he heard: "I never wore a surplice and never used a form of Absolution. My object was to bring home to the penitent or perplexed heart the sense of forgiveness by God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and I strove to do it by the ministry of God's holy Word."¹ The other point to be noticed is the expression "discreet and learned minister." In the 1549 Book it was "discreet and learned priest." The alteration since 1552 to the word "minister" does not, how-

¹ F. J. Jayne, *Anglican Pronouncements*, p. xx.

ever, mean that a man in priest's orders is not the normal person to deal with such cases : obviously he is by reason of the Ordination formula which entrusts to him the general ministry of reconciliation. But, as Dr. Drury says, " it amounts to a refusal to recognise in such private ministry any essentially sacerdotal character " ; for the description " discreet and learned minister of God's Word " emphasises the character and experience of the minister rather than the nature of his office : indeed, the Homily on Repentance does not even restrict it to a minister, but adds, " or to some other godly learned man."

The second exceptional case is that of the sick person, and " the Order for the Visitation of the Sick " has an extremely interesting Absolution :

" Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power to His Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in Him, of His great mercy forgive thee thine offences : and by His authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

There is a good deal of elasticity and freedom as to the use of this Absolution. For one thing, the priest is to absolve the sick person only " if he humbly and heartily desire it." Also, according to Canon LXVII of 1603, the whole of this service is optional, except for those who are not preachers. Moreover, if the priest does use the service, he is not bound to adopt this precise form of Absolution, but is to absolve " after this sort," whereas in the first Prayer-Book the phrase was " after this form." Further, it is clear that the Absolution does not effect the divine forgiveness, for immediately afterwards there is, what Procter and Frere call, " a prayer of Absolution," that God will grant the sick person forgiveness, which would be meaningless if he had already been forgiven by God through the priest's Absolution. This Absolution, however, cannot, I think, refer to the remission of Church censures, for the sick person is only to be moved to confess if his conscience is troubled with any weighty matter, which presupposes the sins to be known previously to himself and God only : the Absolution contains no reference to the restoration to Church fellowship and is only granted at the desire of the sick person ; and release from excommunication is reserved by Article XXXIII to " a judge that hath authority thereunto." Presuming then that the Absolution refers to sins, it is certainly stronger than those of Morning and Evening Prayer and the Holy Communion, and may seem too strong ; yet there are several considerations to be borne in mind. It is careful to state that Christ " hath left power to His *Church* to absolve " ; and though the form " I absolve " (referring to sins in general) is a medieval and not a primitive use, a significant alteration has been made : in the Sarum form " absolve " was used of Christ and the priest, whereas in the Book of Common Prayer a distinction is made—" Our Lord Jesus Christ . . . forgive thee " : " I absolve thee." Next, it is no stronger than an Absolution after public repentance in the Liturgy of John Knox, which runs : " If thou unfeignedly repent thy former

iniquity and believe in the Lord Jesus, then I in His name pronounce and affirm that thy sins are forgiven, not only on earth but also in heaven, according to the promises annexed with the preaching of His Word and to the power put in the ministry of His Church.”¹ It is also to be remembered that a dying man with an uneasy conscience needs peace of mind, and he is given the assurance of forgiveness in the most authoritative form ; and Dr. Charles Harris says : “ Although precatory Absolution is equivalent *theologically* to the form ‘ I absolve thee,’ it is far from equivalent *psychologically*. Our Reformers were guided by a sound psychological instinct when they refused to weaken the authoritative and emphatic form of Absolution provided in the Sarum Manual.”² Yet it is very liable to misunderstanding, and is omitted in the American Prayer-Book, while in the Irish Book the form used is that of the Communion Service. The power and efficacy, however, of the three Absolutions in the Book of Common Prayer are exactly the same doctrinally ; but a private Absolution assures the penitent that God’s forgiving mercy is applicable to his particular case, and may accomplish what the general Absolutions have failed to do. But whether it be general and public, or particular and private, the priest either prays for God’s forgiveness or declares officially that if there is true repentance and faith the divine forgiveness is a blessed certainty.

I turn now to the other side of the subject. Few changes, if any, which the Reformation brought in this country, were more important and influential than that concerning private confession to a priest. For more than three hundred years it had been regarded as a universal, obligatory and indispensable duty. The Reformers not only absolutely rejected this notion, and made such confession voluntary, but they affirmed as an essential principle the freest filial access of the soul to God without human intervention of any kind. Its introduction must have been a very startling change to the people of England. In the second Exhortation of the new Communion Service, they were instructed to confess their sins directly to God, yet if anyone’s conscience was troubled, to go to a discreet and learned priest and confess secretly : but those who used and those who did not use “ auricular and secret confession ” were to exercise mutual toleration. At the same time a general Confession, followed by the Absolution and Comfortable Words, was added to the service. Further, although “ the Sacrament of Penance ” had been specially associated with Lent and confessions were largely held then, yet in the new service for Ash Wednesday no mention was made of confession to a priest ; but the people were earnestly directed to confess their sins to Almighty God. Even a sick person was only to make a special confession, if he felt his conscience troubled with any weighty matter. Several years later came the Second Prayer-Book of Edward VI wherein further changes were introduced, which were the more remarkable because meanwhile in 1551 the Council of Trent had reaffirmed the compulsory duty of

¹ *Liturgy of Church of Scotland*, by J. Cumming, p. 150.

² *Liturgy and Worship*, p. 529.

confession to a priest once a year. In this Prayer-Book of 1552 all mention of "auricular and secret confession" was omitted in the Exhortation, as it has been ever since, as well as the requirement of mutual toleration between those who used or did not use it; the *first* way of coming worthily to the holy Table was self-examination by the light of God's Commandments, and accordingly the Decalogue and Kyries were added to the service. At the same time, as we have already seen, the order to use the Absolution of "The Visitation of the Sick" for all private confessions was withdrawn; and a general Confession, followed by the Absolution, was added to Morning and Evening Prayer, which previously had begun with the Lord's Prayer.

These momentous changes meant that the right of direct access to God without the mediation of a priest was fully affirmed, that the Confessional had gone, that the public and general forms of Confession and Absolution became the ordinary means of receiving the assurance of forgiveness, and that greater self-reliance and a more robust faith were encouraged. But as a last resource for helping those with tender consciences to come worthily to the Holy Communion, a confidential interview with a "discreet and learned minister" is recommended: its purpose is described in general terms—"to open his grief"—a word of wider significance than "sins": it may or may not involve a formal confession: the grief that is specially weighing on the conscience is intended. But a complete enumeration of all sins that can be remembered is certainly not implied: the Homily on Repentance states—"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 and ignorance": and so the Lambeth Conference of 1878 affirmed—"no minister of the Church is authorised to require from those who may resort to him to open their grief a particular or detailed enumeration of all their sins."

Attention was drawn by many Anglican divines, particularly in the seventeenth century, to these provisions of the Prayer-Book for troubled consciences before Communion and for the sick. But although a number of well-known people are mentioned as having made their confessions on their death-beds, and some other cases are recorded when confession was practised more often, yet from time to time reference was made to the prevailing neglect of private confession or regrets were expressed that it was not more practised¹; and H. D. Beste, Fellow of Magdalen, who advocated it in an Oxford University sermon of 1793, was no doubt correct, when in a comment thereon he referred to the "more than two centuries' sturdy resistance to confession" by "the good people of England."² However, in the nineteenth century strenuous efforts were made on its behalf by Dr. Pusey and others, and the practice was regularly adopted by many of his followers, as it is by their successors.

The question is not whether special or private confession is allow-

¹ *Hierurgia Anglicana*, pt. iii: pp. 44, 51, 57, 59 f., 71, 74 f., 76, 80.

² P. 166. Cf. pp. 98 f., 109 (ed. 1874).

able—of course it is under exceptional circumstances—but whether the formularies of the Church of England authorise, encourage or reject the tenets that it is either necessary for all faithful Church people, or advisable for most, to resort to what is called the Sacrament of Penance.

Firstly then, are the terms “ Sacrament of Penance,” and “ Sacramental Confession ” recognised by our formularies? The word penance is used in the Prayer-Book in two senses. As the usual term for the public discipline of the early Church, it is mentioned in our Commination Service and in Article XXXIII; and the restoration of that “ godly discipline ” for notorious sinners was desired by various Anglican divines of the Reformation and post-Reformation periods. The other use of the word occurs in Article XXV, where it is stated that Penance is not to be regarded as a sacrament of the Gospel. This so-called sacrament, so far from having a visible sign ordained by Christ, was not even appointed by Him; for St. John xx. 23, makes no reference to confession or to any particular means of seeking forgiveness, and is to be understood, as we have seen, in the large sense of the general ministry of reconciliation. The Homily on Common Prayer and Sacraments does, it is true, allow that Absolution may be called a sacrament in the general sense whereby any holy thing can be so termed, but that is not what is meant by those who call it a sacrament. In point of fact, the Sacrament of Penance was a creation of the later Middle Ages; and Hooker severely criticised the Roman Church for making a sacrament “ of their own devising and shaping ” for remitting mortal sins committed after baptism. He also referred to the term “ Sacramental Confession ” as Roman ¹; and the formularies of the Church of England know no such term.

Secondly, an unwise and intemperate advocacy would apply private confession to everybody. Statements are current that “ the Church of England puts a man on his honour ” to go to private confession to a priest, that you cannot be “ a good Catholic ” without it, and that it is obligatory for mortal sins. Many, including the young, are made to feel that there can be no true assurance of forgiveness without it; it is urged as almost necessary for the highest spiritual life. There are clergy who refuse to present candidates for Confirmation unless they have been to Confession. It is pressed continually in preaching and teaching: it is urged insistently on men and women, boys and girls. The belief, which often underlies it, is that private Absolution is the only remedy for post-baptismal mortal sin. But there is neither Scriptural nor Primitive authority for such a doctrine, and it is not to be found in our formularies. There is no doubt whatever that according to the Prayer-Book resort to special Confession must be really and altogether voluntary: no compulsion direct or indirect is authorised: and nothing can justify such a grave departure from a basic principle of the Church of England, such a forgetfulness of the free forgiveness of God, and such an encroachment on Christian liberty. In 1898, when the

¹ *Eccles. Pol.*, VI, ch. vi, 2; ch. iv, 3, 6.

subject was in the public mind, Charles Gore wrote to *The Times* : "The Bishops can be, and I trust will be, rigorous in suppressing any tendency to make confession obligatory, or to press it strongly on those whose consciences do not feel the need of it, or to treat those who go to confession as in a higher class spiritually than those who do not." ¹

Moreover, the Prayer-Book does not authorise such confession for the young, who have not been confirmed. Advice and warning can be given to them in other ways. Advantage should not be taken of their inexperience and impressionability ; and to ensure this, Bishop Creighton once made three practical requests which are worthy of remembrance, that no literature concerning confession should be given to candidates for Confirmation, that it should not be urged upon them as a preliminary for Confirmation, and that no teaching should be given them on the subject beyond what is contained in the Book of Common Prayer.²

Further, is habitual confession, that is to say the habit of going to a priest for confession at regular intervals, as a normal custom and means of grace in the Christian life, sanctioned or encouraged by the Prayer-Book ? The latter undoubtedly postulates the sense of need as a condition of private confession ; it is for the unquiet conscience ; it is a special treatment, a medicine rather than the food of the soul. Habitual confession seems to defeat its own purpose, and without a sense of need is likely to degenerate into formalism or become a mere sop to conscience. Next, the Prayer-Book, like the New Testament, emphasises personal responsibility to God, and the Exhortation in the Communion Service tells us, if we possibly can, to cure ourselves. Habitual confession undermines the direct access of the soul to God, for it means the habitual interposition of the priest. As Hooker put it, contrasting the English Church with Roman Catholics, "We labour to instruct men in such sort that every soul which is wounded with sin may learn the way how to cure itself : they, clean contrary, would make all sores seem incurable, unless the priest have a hand in them." ³ Moreover, while I gladly and fully acknowledge the highmindedness of many who have most strongly advocated habitual confession, it remains true, as Bishop Moberly, himself a High Churchman, said of habitual confession and constant spiritual direction : "the life and conscience of men and women are subjected to the absolute sway, secretly exercised, of men of whose wisdom and capacity the Church has no assurance, and who have received no jurisdiction to exercise such powers in such a way." ⁴ It is not surprising then to find the Lambeth Conference of 1878, affirming that "no minister of the Church is authorised . . . to enjoin or even encourage the practice of habitual confession."

In conclusion, the opening of the mind and its sorrows to a minister, as the Prayer-Book directs, may well be salutary to those who cannot otherwise quiet their consciences. Ordinarily, however,

¹ August 23.

² *Eccles. Pol.*, VI, ch. vi, 2.

³ *Life and Letters*, II, 365.

⁴ Charge, 1873, p. 33.

a better use can be made of the general Confessions in public worship and a higher value attached to the gracious words of Absolution, which fall as gentle dew from heaven and refresh the hearts of the penitent. It should be remembered also that Absolution is entrusted to the Church as a whole, that all believers share with one another the priesthood, and that each can exercise his or her ministry by bringing help and healing to the troubled in spirit.

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