

THE REVD CANON MEYRICK ON CONFESSION

(Late Fellow and Tutor of Trinity College, Oxford)

Church Association Tract 312

I. What it is.

It is a system authoritatively instituted in 1215 by Innocent III. (the Pope that made our King John his vassal and released him from his engagements to observe Magna Charta), according to which every man and woman is bound at least once a year to confess to his parish priest all the grave sins that he has committed since his last confession. The priest, sitting in his tribunal as the representative of God, listens to his statements, inquires into his frame of mind, passes judgment on his state, and, if he thinks proper, conveys to him God's pardon for his sins in the form of an absolution, on the condition of his satisfying God by performing certain painful acts, specified by the priest, which shall make up for his sinful acts, and are substituted for eternal punishment. This is the minimum demanded by Pope Innocent's injunctions, and now binding on every Roman Catholic man and woman, but it is further taught that "good Catholics" ought not to be contented with this minimum, that they ought to use the confessional as a singular means of growing in grace and holiness, and that the more frequently that they expose the inmost feelings of their hearts to the priest the better they will become, and for this purpose they ought not to confine themselves to the enumeration of their grave sins but to count up and tell out all their lighter failures and feelings which they ought not to have entertained, accepting in every case the judgment of the priest as to what they should do to make up for their wrong acts and thoughts and words and desires. In both cases the confession must be made, not indeed with sorrow for having offended God, but at least with sorrow arising from the fear of punishment in this world or the next. With this imperfect sorrow and the confession and acceptance of the penance imposed by the priest, the sinner may be assured that his sins are wiped out by the priest's absolution, and he may now either lead a new life or he may begin again and go through the same process as before of transgression, confession and absolution.

II. What it sprang out of.

Innocent III., with or without the Fourth Lateran Council, changed the Christian faith in many essential particulars by the novel tenets which he sanctioned; but yet he must have had something which he could transmute into his various new doctrines.

In the present case it was this:

In the early Church men who were known to be guilty of crimes represented by (in Gregory Nyssen's time, A.D. 373, confined to) apostasy, murder, homicide, adultery, fornication, assault and robbery, robbery of graves, witchcraft and sacrilege were excluded from the Lord's Table, and they were not re-admitted to it until they had acknowledged their fault before the congregation which, on that acknowledgment, prayed to God for the forgiveness of their transgressions. In the sixth century it came to be thought that the prayers of the clergy might be taken in place of those of the congregation, as certain inconveniences followed both to the penitent and to members of the congregation from the public profession of crime; but the clergy were regarded only as the substitutes of the congregation, and their prayers were regarded as the congregation's prayers. But as sacerdotalism spread, another position was assigned to the clergy. Imperceptibly they came to be looked upon as the representatives not of the congregation but of God, and it was supposed that their function was, not to pray for the sinner's forgiveness but to impart it. The idea was encouraged by the priesthood, not always from a vulgar desire of pre-eminence, but because they thought that their influence, thus confirmed, would have a good effect on the world. Throughout the Middle Ages there was no learning except among the clergy; few others could even read and write,

much less argue a point of theology or history. Thus it came to pass that Innocent III., in the thirteenth century, was able without remonstrance to promulgate and enforce his doctrine of the confessional with the authority conceded to the Popes, owing to a belief in the genuineness of the False Decretals, which had not yet been discredited and which represented the Popes of Rome as monarchs of the Church.

III. Its Effects Religiously and Socially.

As to its effects on religion, we may accept Bishop John Wordsworth's frank statement: "It rendered Communion infrequent; it fostered a coarse and material conception of sin; it checked the development of a sense of responsibility; it encouraged priestly pretentiousness" (*Letter to Clergy*, 1898). Socially it proved itself harmful to the State, to the family, to the confessor, and to the penitent. To the State by destroying the self-reliance of a manly people (called by Lord Salisbury "the moral independence and virility of the nation," *Speech*, 1873), and unduly biasing the mind of a statesman; to the family by setting up a power in it superseding that of the head of the house; to the confessor by puffing him up with arrogance as fulfilling the function of God; to the penitent by overthrowing the authority of conscience.

IV. Its Abolition at the Reformation.

The system of the confessional, as formulated by Innocent III., is abolished in the English Church. Confession and Absolution are no longer parts of the normal life of the Christian, and are not recognised as the means to grow in grace. They are only admitted when a sinner cannot assure himself of God's forgiveness, when preparing himself for the Holy Communion or for death.

V. It is unknown to Scripture.

Two texts are quoted; one is that on "binding and loosing" (Matt. xviii.-18). But "binding and loosing" mean in Hebrew usage "permitting" and "prohibiting," and to permit some things and to prohibit other things has nothing to do with confessing and forgiving sins. The other text is "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (John xx.-23). This text seems more relevant, but it is not so really; for what it means is that the Apostles were to admit some persons into the covenant with God, in which case they would be forgiven, and to refuse admission to others, in which case they would continue to be men whose sins were as yet unforgiven, unforgiven until converted and thereupon admitted. That has nothing to do with a penitent's confession and absolution.

The system of the confessional finds no support in Holy Scripture or in the Primitive Church. To restore it in the Church of England would be to substitute mediaeval doctrine and practice for the doctrine of Holy Scripture and the doctrine and practice of the Primitive Church, recovered at the Reformation.