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ART. V.—ABSOLUTION.

THERE are three forms of absolution in the Prayer-Book of the Church of England. (i.) That in the Morning and Evening Prayer is declaratory, *i.e.*, it is a formal declaration that God pardons for Jesus Christ's sake all them that truly repent and unfeignedly believe His holy Gospel; (ii.) that in the Communion Service is precatory, *i.e.*, it is prayer for God's pardon; while (iii.) the absolution in the Service for the Visitation of the Sick is a combination of the precatory form and the indicative form relating to ecclesiastical censures, *i.e.*, it commences with a prayer to the Lord Jesus Christ that He would forgive the sick man, and it ends with the indicative absolution from ecclesiastical censures. An examination of ecclesiastical history on these points is most instructive, and shows that as Paul and the Corinthians punished and expelled the offending Corinthian, as they forgave him on his repentance for the scandal done, so did the early Church act in the age following the Apostles. The Church forgave a sin against the Church, in so far as it was only against the Church, just as a man has a right to forgive sins against man, so far as the offence is against man. Beyond this the Church did not venture to go. Sins against God, or that part of sin which was a sin against God, was left to God alone. A *public* scandal against the Church had to be openly and publicly acknowledged or confessed before the whole Church, and certain penalties were imposed upon those who wished to be restored into the Christian Communion or Church; but all these penalties had no reference whatever to the guilt of the sinner in reference to Almighty God, or to the sin committed against Him.

The penalties or discipline imposed upon the offending members of the Christian Church did not in their character long preserve the simplicity of the punishment imposed upon the offending Corinthian. The penitents stood bareheaded and barefooted before the gates of the church; they were clothed in sackcloth, they prostrated themselves at the feet of the bishops and publicly acknowledged their offence, and thereupon received the public forgiveness of the Church for the sin done against the Church, but their sin as regards God, and all the sins of the rest of the people who had committed no notorious sins, were left to the ordinary remedies for sin against God, confession to Him and acceptance of His mercy through Christ. There was no private confession to a priest either by notorious offenders or by the people in general, and no "absolvo te" pronounced in secret by any officer of the

Church. But there is nothing that the advocates of "confession" to a priest would so ardently desire as to confound this public acknowledgment by notorious offenders of their sin or scandal against the Church—a public confession in which the vast body of Christians took no part whatever—with private or auricular confession and absolution, a practice which was then unknown to the Church.

"Secret confession" is spoken of by the editor of the Notes on Tertullian's "De Penitentiâ" in the "Library of the Fathers," who we may assume from the initials "E. B. P." to have been Dr. Pusey, as "unknown to the antients," and "wholly omitted in the earlier Church." But there always have been, and will be, people of weak natures who will crave to obtain the confidence of their fellow-mortals in the matter of sin even against God, and thus to unbosom themselves to the "president" of the congregation became the practice of some, but only with a view to obtaining advice, and not absolution. This "confidence" is not confession, nor should we for a moment allow it to be confounded with it—indeed, Maldonat admits it has nothing to do with sacramental confession; but it contains to us of this age a solemn warning of the danger of "confidence" sliding into and ending in confession.

The spurious Clemens and Origen are the earliest advocates of this occasional confidence, the object of which was not absolution—and this is most important to bear in mind—but that the penitent might be healed "by the Word of God." Gradually another morbid custom developed itself. As the energies of individual faith in God's promises waxed cold, people publicly and unnecessarily accused themselves of their own secret sins when of heinous character, in order to obtain the prayers of the people and the ceremonial pardon of the Church, *in so far as the sin thus voluntarily made public was an injury to the Church.* This now gradually fastened itself upon the more ancient public discipline for notorious sin, and it began to be encouraged as a meritorious act.

Gross and unnecessary scandals were thus produced, and about A.D. 300 it was thought necessary in Constantinople to appoint a special officer of the Church called Penitentiarius, whose duty it was to hear confessions, but not to forgive or absolve the penitent either of his sins against God or even against the Church (and thus wholly and utterly different from the modern confessional), but only to see if his sins or his case was such as required public discipline at all, and to instruct the penitent for this purpose. See "Bingham," vol. vi., pp. 490-493, wherein it is made plain that the Penitentiarius had nothing whatever to do with absolution or with the forgiveness of sin against God, but was only concerned to instruct

the penitent as to public penance and its suitability for his case. But the tendency of the office was to give a dignity and formal authorization to private confession, and was undoubtedly a downward step in the history of the Church. The office lasted for only eighty years, and was then, after a grave scandal, suppressed by Nectarius, Bishop of Constantinople.

But by the side of this we have about the same date an unbroken line of witnesses against confession to fallen man of sin against God. Chrysostom says, "Reveal thy way unto the Lord; confess thy sins before God; confess them before the Judge . . . and so look to obtain mercy." And again, "Dost thou confess them to thy fellow-servant? It is to thy Lord, to Him who careth for thee, thy Physician, thy Friend, that thou shewest thy wound, and He saith to thee, 'Confess thy sin in private to Me alone, that I may heal thy wound, and deliver thee from thy grief.'" The Greek of this faithful witness lies before me, and makes his golden voice live again and ring over the chasm of fourteen centuries, so that "he being dead yet speaketh." In like manner Basil and Hilary, and Ambrose and Augustine, the last-named of which illustrious band says, "What have I to do with men, that they should hear my confessions as though they could heal all my diseases?"

Such passages *could* not have been written if confession to a priest and absolution by him were the recognised method for remission of sins as against God. It is also to be noticed in connection with the abolition of the office of the Penitentiarius, or Public Confessor, in Constantinople that Nectarius contemplated permitting everyone to partake of the Communion on the witness of his own conscience: "A near approach to the system of our own Church, which would have got rid of the evils and scandals and the tyranny of public discipline," without substituting for them the more deadly evils and scandals of auricular confession and judicial absolution by a priest.

This, alas! is what *did* happen. Public discipline gradually withered and dropped, and the original object of that discipline, as a satisfaction to the Church, began to be forgotten, and the penance imposed began to be regarded as a condition of forgiveness by God of sins against Himself. So that according to the famous, though confused, rescript of Pope Leo I. in A.D. 440, "forgiveness from God cannot be obtained but through the supplication of the priest."

But note, however, that even yet the priest is to act not as judge, as the Council of Trent represents him, but simply as an intercessory "precator."

And, moreover, in spite of advancing error and the increasing use of private confession thus pressed in by Pope

Leo upon the Campanian bishops, there remained still burning brightly in the Church a great witness for the truth in the nature of the absolution used. Will it be believed that the indicative, "I absolve thee," was at this date absolutely unknown? "*God* give thee remission," was the form used. Unscriptural and darkly ominous as was the private confession then used, it was separated by this great gulf from its modern counterfeit.

We cannot dwell too strongly upon the significant fact that the public absolution pronounced in the Church of these and earlier times, whether as regards sins which were only sins against God, or as regards the sin against God which was involved in a public scandal against the Church, was only a prayer that God would forgive the penitent. The indicative, "I absolve thee," no one in the early Church ever dared to use for sins against God.

Dr. Marshall, in his work on the "Penitential Discipline of the Church," republished in the Anglo-Catholic Library, says that absolution as regards the conscience of the sinner for sins against God "was always in the form of prayer throughout the earliest ages," and the reader will hereafter find that it continued so for a thousand years.

I therefore append the "Absolution" to be found at the end of St. James's Liturgy, and which is entitled "The Prayer of Propitiation": "O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, thou Shepherd and Lamb, that takest away the sins of the world, that forgavest the debt to the two debtors, and grantedst remission of sins to the sinful woman, and gavest to the sick of the palsy both a cure and pardon of sins; remit, blot out, and pardon our sins, both voluntary and involuntary, whatsoever we have done willingly or unwillingly, by transgression and disobedience, which Thy Spirit knoweth better than ourselves. And whereinsoever Thy servants have erred from Thy commandments in word or deed, as men carrying flesh about them and living in the world, or seduced by the instigations of Satan or whatsoever curse or peculiar anathema they are fallen under; I pray and beseech Thy ineffable goodness to absolve them with Thy word, and remit their curse and anathema according to Thy mercy. O Lord and Master, hear my prayer for Thy servants; Thou that forgettest injuries, overlook all their failings, pardon their offences, both voluntary and involuntary, and deliver them from eternal punishment. For Thou art He that hast commanded us saying, 'Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.' Because Thou art our God, the God that canst have mercy and save and forgive sins; and

to Thee, with the eternal Father and the quickening Spirit, belongs glory now and for ever, world without end. Amen."

The Greek of this noble prayer, for prayer and nothing else this prayer for absolution is, which witnesses as truly as our Protestant Prayer-Book for the truth as it is in Jesus, is to be found in Bingham, vol. vi., p. 553, and as above at end of St. James's Liturgy. And a similar form was used for many ages in the Latin Church. See the form of absolution in the old Latin missal published by Illyricas and Cardinal Bona, where it is found as follows: "He that forgave the sinful woman all her sins for which she shed tears, and opened the gate of Paradise to the thief upon a single confession, make you partaker of His redemption and absolve you from all the bond of your sins, and heal those infirm members by the medicine of His mercy, and restore them to the body of His holy Church by His grace, and keep them whole and sound for ever."

And yet in the face of the fact that for centuries the early Church only prayed for or declared God's mercy for sinners who repented, there are Romanizers to be found who would lead us as slaves to the feet of the priest to receive from him his novel and unholy "I absolve thee" for sins committed against God.

Religiously it is a crime, and historically it is a blunder. Nor even for sins against the Church was the indicative "I absolve thee" used at this date, unless we except the case of Zephyrinus mentioned by Tertullian. The earliest use of the indicative "We absolve thee" is contained in the Pontifical of Egbert, Archbishop of York, A.D. 767; but this is in a service intended for public penitents, and refers to sins against the Church, and where remission of sins against God is spoken of the form becomes a prayer.

As we move onwards down the centuries, we find such degradation introduced as the penitent being allowed to commute his penance by a gift of money to the Church or other charitable purpose, or to discharge his penance vicariously by employing substitutes.

A rich grandee who had been enjoined a penance of fasting for seven years might discharge it by employing about 1,000 men, who would for a payment of money to them fast in his place, and accomplish as much fasting in three days as he could in seven years. But a poor person should, we are told, "with great diligence exact the penance in himself." And at last came the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, which took the memorable step of making confession and absolution by the priest necessary to retain communion with the Church. In previous times public confession and public absolution, as explained above, were only deemed necessary for a few notorious sinners, in order to regain communion when lost, but now by

this decree private confession and private absolution were made obligatory for sins against God upon every adult and for all his sins. Mark the radical difference between this and the ancient custom. And the top-stone was put on when it was ordained in 1268, at a council held in London by Cardinal Othobon, that absolution should be given only in the specially prescribed form, "I absolve thee from all thy sins."

But even in this thirteenth century, writers, such as Hablensis, quoted by Dr. Marshall, assert that this indicative "I absolve thee" only refers to the "reconciling the sinner to the Church. In token of this there is premised to the formulary of absolution a prayer, and then the absolution itself follows, which is pronounced indicatively." Upon this Marshall observes: "The indicative 'I absolve thee' was only at first understood to reconcile to the Church."

The bearing of all this upon the absolution in our own service for the Visitation of the Sick, to which I almost exclusively direct my remarks, is most important. It is impossible that our Reformers, who must have known the history of these facts I have laid before you, could have intended that "I absolve thee" in their service should refer to sin against God, or to anything but the burden of Church censures, a *weighty matter* in their days. Had the words in their opinion referred to sin against God, they would have probably regarded them as blasphemous, and they would certainly have considered them as contrary to the usage of the early Church and as repugnant to the Word of God.

They must have been aware of the well-known statement in Aquinas, of the thirteenth century, with reference to the introduction of the modern "I absolve thee," made by one who objected to its use on the ground that scarce thirty years had passed since all did use this form only: "Almighty God give thee remission and forgiveness"; and they must have known how that the words had gradually since the thirteenth century descended and been degraded from their original reference to Church censures to mean a Divine sentence for the remission of sin. Would the Reformers have followed that disastrous descent even to the depths of the decree of the Council of Trent? It is incredible that they could have applied the words to sin against God.

I am aware that the "I absolve thee" of the service for the Visitation of the Sick is explained by some as simply declaratory of God's remission of sin against Him, and this is supported by the authority of Jerome, quoted by Bingham (vi. 558), who says: "The priests under the old law were said to cleanse a leper or pollute him; not that they were the authors of his pollution, but that they *declared* him to be so"; and of Lombard, who says, speaking of the priests of the

Gospel : "These forgive sins or retain them, whilst they show or declare that they are forgiven or retained by God, for the priest of old put the name of the Lord upon the children of Israel, *but* it was He Himself that blessed them" (Numb. vi. 27).

Thus a sound distinction would be established between "forgiveness" and "absolution," "forgiveness" being in the hands of God alone, who alone can pardon *and* absolve, as in the "Absolution" in Morning Prayer: "He pardoneth and absolveth"; while the Church, though she cannot *pardon* sin, *can* set forth God's sweet promises in Christ as to that pardon, and thus by leading the sinner to faith in God's mercy through Christ looses the chains and shackles of unbelief and timidity or despair, and declares to the sinner that God *does* pardon him if he repents and believes this Gospel, and that so believing he *is* absolved. This sense of "absolve" in the Visitation Service is a good one, and is supported by Bingham, who says the words may reasonably be interpreted, according to the account given out of Jerome and others, as a "declaration of the sinner's pardon."

T. S. TREANOR.

(*To be continued.*)



ART. VI.—SELF-DENIAL IN MINISTERIAL LIFE.

AN ADDRESS TO CANDIDATES FOR ORDERS.

"Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister."—St. Matt. xx. 26.

IF ever there was a time when the officers of the Church of Christ seemed in a position to be like the princes of the Gentiles, exercising dominion over their parishes, or like the great ones of the earth, claiming authority over them, that time is certainly not now. Most of you, my brothers, when you go to your districts, will find practically only a small section who are ready to enter into direct relations with you as their spiritual friend. In a large number of parishes where the people are educated and wealthy, they are mostly too worldly to pay you any particular attention. In the parishes where the great majority of our fellow-citizens live—the working classes—the population is so large, it shifts so frequently, and owing to the neglect of older generations it is so materialized and indifferent, that the notion of an inherent spiritual authority, if asserted, would have to most of them no meaning at all. The claim of spiritual autocracy would in any case be bad for yourself, and contrary to the directions of Christ; men have to be persuaded, not commanded; but in the present day there is little opportunity for the temptation to occur. The majority of the parishioners among whom you are to work will not be in any real sense members of the congregation,