

PENITENCE AND
FORGIVENESS

By the late
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With a Memoir of the Author by

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those who have never yet made use of it, and perhaps are hardly aware of its existence, but feel the need of some such remedy for sin in their own personal lives.

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Penitence and Forgiveness

I. THE ATONEMENT

CHRISTIAN experience has from the beginning held that it is only possible for man to be delivered from his sins through the death of Jesus on the Cross. It is only through the power of the Cross to reveal the horror of sin and the infinite love of God that he is enabled to come to that adequate sorrow for sin which is a necessary condition of repentance. So far there is a fairly general agreement. But, further, it has been generally held that the sufferings of Jesus on the Cross, considered as the climax of His earthly life which expresses in a single act the meaning of the whole, are in some sense the offering by Him of a sacrifice which has taken away the sins of the world. No amount of repentance on the part of man could make him worthy of the divine forgiveness; his sins are too great to make his pardon possible without the voluntary acceptance, by One who is no less than God Himself, of the suffering which those sins deserved. Thus in the Cross we see the solution of the contradiction between the absolute justice of God which demands man's punishment and the absolute mercy which seeks to forgive him.

The problem of the Atonement has been both in ancient and modern times the subject of many controversies. On the one hand it is urged that the claim that the Cross is a sacrifice for the sins of man involves a false conception of God as an angry ruler who can only be placated by the punishment of those who have rebelled against Him; and of course this is perfectly true as a criticism of the language which has often been employed. The wrath of God has often been described in the language of the Old Testament, without any regard for the modification in our knowledge of the divine nature which results from the Incarnation. On the other hand the attempt to limit the Atonement to the setting of an example, which reveals both the sin of man and the love of God, and thus excites repentance in the only really effective manner, fails to do justice to the depth of Christian experience which is expressed in the simple phrase, "Jesus died for me." This sense of a divine act of propitiation, without which it is impossible for God to forgive, is one of the essential elements of Christian devotion. It has often been ill-expressed; it has never been interpreted by any formal definition of the Church; but it seems impossible to eliminate it without permanently impoverishing Christian devotion of its deepest contents. It must be remembered that here, as elsewhere, Christian experience is prior to Christian theology. It is the function of theology to explain and interpret the truths as to the nature of God and His relations to

man which the Christian revelation and the religious experience of Christians provide, not to explain them away.

The scope and subject of this book preclude a full investigation of the doctrine of the Atonement. It is, however, necessary to begin with a reference to it, in order to make it clear that in all that follows it is assumed not only that penitence is only made fully possible by the death of Jesus on the Cross, but also that human penitence without that divine act of self-oblation for the sins of the world could never by itself atone to God for the wrongs inflicted by the sin of man. It is only the Cross that enables us to repent; and it is only "the merits of the precious Blood of Jesus" that make it possible for the penitent to obtain that pardon which his own repentance by itself could never deserve.

It is, of course, not intended by this to deny that penitence for sin was known in the world before the Incarnation, or that it cannot be found in non-Christian religions or among men who profess no religion at all. But from the Christian point of view it is only in virtue of the grace of God given through the Cross that such penitence is possible. Although the penitent may never have heard of Jesus, or may openly deny Him, it is still through his apprehension, however inadequate, of the nature of God, which is fully expressed only in the death of Jesus, that he can feel the desire to repent; and it is only in virtue of the death of Jesus that his repentance has any value in the sight of God. It is

“the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” who takes away the sins of mankind; it is His death as an eternal fact in the knowledge of God that avails for the sins of those who lived before that eternal fact was accomplished in time, and that avails now for those who have never heard of the fact or deny its value.

II. THE CHRISTIAN IDEAL

THERE could be no greater misunderstanding of the nature of the Christian life than to suppose that its ideal is the attainment of a moderate standard of virtue, which is mainly concerned with avoiding the more obvious and scandalous forms of vice. It is, of course, true that for many people for quite considerable periods of their lives the effort needed to attain even to this standard of conduct is a very severe one; it may represent for them all that is at the moment attainable. But to regard this as the Christian ideal is a complete perversion of the teaching of Jesus, whose fiercest denunciations were addressed to those who regarded the attainment of a conventional standard of moral conduct as the supreme ideal of life. “The publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.” The Christian ideal is nothing less than the Incarnate life of the Lord Himself. This does not, of course, mean that every Christian is bound to attempt to find for every detail of his life some saying of Jesus which will prescribe his precise course of conduct or some action which will serve as a precedent. It does mean that he ought by prayer and the use of the Sacraments and the study of the Gospels so to saturate his mind and soul with the spirit of Christ that in his ordinary daily actions

he will act as Christ would have acted if He had been placed in precisely the same position. There may be occasions when literal imitation is possible; the well-known story of St Martin and the beggar is an instance of such a case. But the Christian life is never the imitation of an external example; it is the attainment to a certain frame of mind, which is the mind of Christ in us or the indwelling of the Holy Ghost. If it were the former, Christianity would be entirely impracticable, since it would never be possible to be certain how Our Lord would have acted unless we were certain that our own conditions, judged from the point of view of our own particular vocation in life, correspond precisely to those of any particular incident of the Gospel story. Obviously, such a certainty is rarely, if ever, attainable. The fact that Our Lord on one occasion advised a rich young man to sell all that he had and give it to the poor proves that such a course was the ideal one for that particular young man in his particular circumstances. It will never by itself make it certain that it is the right course for me to follow. The fact that it makes a great impression on me may be to some extent an indication that it is the right course and my particular vocation, but it will not absolve me from the duty of considering whether I am justified in leaving my present sphere of life, in which I may be doing valuable service to God and to the world in general, whether I can leave it to others to provide for those who may be dependent on me, and all the other questions which

must be faced before I can rightly decide on my particular vocation. To take another instance, Our Lord's words, "Man, who made Me to be a judge and a divider over you?" are a quite clear condemnation of a litigious spirit among Christians. But they have never been held to prohibit Christians from resorting to the law for justice in all conceivable circumstances or to render it unlawful for a Christian to be a lawyer or a judge, yet it is the duty of a judge to do habitually precisely what Our Lord refused to do.

Thus the Christian ideal does not consist in a literal imitation of the example of Jesus which would inevitably be impossible. As it is, the Christian ideal is unattainable in the sense that we can never hope to attain to the absolute perfection of His holiness. But it is possible for us to grow continually in His spirit and to come nearer to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. We shall never attain to it fully in this life, but we can always go on approximating to it if we use the means of grace aright. We do so by trying to view our own position in life in the light of the teaching and example of Jesus, not by seeking a precept or example which we can follow literally.

(*Note.*—It is sometimes said that the Christian ought to guide his conduct by asking himself what Our Lord would have done in the circumstances in which he finds himself. The question may sometimes be a valuable method of revealing to one's own conscience that one of two possible courses of

action is really unjustifiable and so crushing the tendency to self-deception, which for the moment suggests that the lower alternative is as good as the higher. But in such a case there is no real moral doubt as to which is the right course to pursue; the question only serves to stimulate conscience into insisting on the higher course. Where there is a perfectly genuine moral doubt as to which course is really the right one, whether, for example, I ought in my financial position at any given moment to give my money to charity or invest it for the benefit of those dependent on me, the question does nothing to solve the problem, because there is no answer to it, assuming that there is really a genuine uncertainty as to what is really the best course for me to follow at this particular moment and in my own particular circumstances.)

Thus the ideal of the Christian life is nothing less than the full and perfect realisation of the Spirit of Christ in the daily life of the Christian. In other words it is nothing less than a complete surrender of the whole personality, body, mind, and soul, to the love and service of God, and, for His sake, to the love and service of our neighbour, the latter word being interpreted in that widest sense which it receives in the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is the spirit of the Lord's Prayer, in which the first half is concerned with the advancement of the glory of God and in the whole of which we ask nothing for ourselves which we do not at the same moment ask for the rest of mankind. It is the spirit

which seeks first the kingdom of God and His righteousness with the full confidence that all things which we may need will be given us by Him who feeds the fowls of the air and clothes the lilies of the field. Nothing could be further removed from the true spirit of Christian devotion than the complacent respectability of the conventional epitaph of the eighteenth century.

It is necessary to insist at the outset on this positive character of the Christian ideal, for the simple reason that even among regular churchgoers it is often completely ignored or misunderstood. It is common to hear such statements as "I haven't any sins" or "I never do any harm to anyone" put forward as if they were the equivalents of the statement "I am a good Christian." It is probable that nothing has done so much harm to religion in England as the wide acceptance of the belief that Christian virtue is the same thing as conventional morality. The character of the Pharisee is as repellent as the character of Christ is attractive. Once it is seen that nothing less than the full achievement of the character of Christ is the end of the Christian life it becomes impossible for anyone to claim that he is a good Christian or to deny his need of penitence and forgiveness. It has already been noticed that for certain persons at certain times the mere attainment of moderate respectability may involve a tremendous moral effort which is a genuine bearing of the Cross. But the attainment to a level of such conventional morality

does not justify man in supposing that he has done all his duty. To think this is to ignore the warning of the terrible parable of the unclean spirit which is cast out of a man but returns later to find his old habitation empty, swept, and garnished, and comes back bringing seven other devils worse than himself. Such is the state of the man who, after overcoming serious temptations to vice, relapses into the worse sins of spiritual pride and selfishness.

For the Christian ideal is nothing less than one of complete unselfishness, a state in which we see ourselves as nothing and God as everything. In the light of that vision we see our neighbours as possessing in the sight of God a value precisely equal to our own—a value which cannot be expressed in any lower terms than that it was worth while for Jesus to die for them, and that it is only through Him that either they or we can hope for salvation. It is not, of course, necessary that Christian devotion should express itself in any of those activities which are normally classed under the head of "social service." Such activities are only open to certain people. The disinterested labours of the artist or thinker, the life of a business man who puts the ideal of service to the community before his own personal profits, or the care of a family may be as true an expression of the Christian ideal as a life entirely devoted to the service of the poor, as may also be a life devoted entirely to prayer and contemplation. But in all cases the essence of the Christian life is that it must be an attempt to realise

in the circumstances of our own time and place the spirit of the Lord Jesus Himself.

It is of course impossible to describe the Christian spirit adequately in few sentences. For a full understanding of it we can only go back to the Gospels. We must familiarise ourselves with the life and teaching of Jesus if we hope in any measure, however small, to attain to an understanding of the meaning of Christian holiness. By reading them and still more by meditation on them we shall gradually grow in the knowledge of God which is revealed to us in the face of Jesus Christ; without such study the meaning of the Christian life will remain an impenetrable mystery. We may, of course, study the spirit of Christ not only in His own life, but also in the lives of the saints in whom He has manifested the power of His grace.

III. THE NATURAL MAN

IN one sense man, as he enters on his conscious life, is neither good nor evil. His temperament is a confused mass of impulses, which may be trained either for good or evil—as good and evil are judged by the revelation of God in the person of Christ. Some of these impulses may need to be held in check or repressed over a considerable part of life; others can be diverted from the end to which they naturally would lead in order that they may in some new form serve to the glory of God; others again only need to be developed along their natural lines in order that they may bring forth the fruit of Christian holiness. On the other hand, without proper training they will almost inevitably tend in the opposite direction. If we try to imagine a man who had received no training at all which would discipline his natural impulses into some sort of subordination to the welfare of society—whether based on religious sanctions or not—he might from time to time perform actions which in their social effect were good, in order to gratify some particular impulse; but such actions would be accompanied by others intended to gratify other impulses, which would have bad effects.

The case imagined is obviously an impossible one; but it serves to bring out the element of truth

contained in the old belief that man's nature of itself is utterly depraved. It is not true that it is entirely made up of bad impulses; but it is true that it is entirely self-centred, and that the natural tendency of man to seek only the gratification of the impulse of the moment must produce disastrous results unless his character is subjected to some kind of control or guidance.

It is this fact that led to the development in Jewish and early Christian theology of the doctrine of original sin. But the development of that doctrine was complicated by the fact that in the early days of Christianity the frequency of sudden conversions, bringing with them a remarkable sense of deliverance from old temptations, led to the belief that original sin was removed by baptism. It is, however, obvious that, except in the case of the psychological phenomenon of a sudden and violent conversion, the tendency to self-centredness remains more or less unaffected by the acceptance of Christianity. A very large part of the Christian life consists of a struggle against the manifestations of that tendency which baptism was supposed to have removed. A further difficulty is raised by the fact that recent psychological investigation tends to show that in many cases tendencies towards bad habits are due not to the natural endowments of a child, but to the unconscious influence of his surroundings before he attains to the use of reason. Consequently, it has to be recognised that original sin in the theological sense cannot be identified with that tendency to

self-centredness which is natural to humanity, but is an expression of the theological fact that in a sinful world man needs to be transferred from a state of nature to a state of grace, in which it is possible for him to begin that development by which he can in the end substitute the Christian for the natural view of life. The effect of baptism is not to produce a psychological change in him, except, indeed, in so far as in the case of an adult the ceremony of baptism may, and to some extent must, produce a psychological effect, but to effect the incorporation of the person baptised into that new spiritual order of life which is represented by the Christian dispensation. He has still to make good his claim to that place by submitting voluntarily to the demands which Our Lord makes of His disciples. At the same time the doctrine of baptismal regeneration represents the important truth that the first step towards the new order of life is only made possible by a free gift of God; it is not something which man can claim as his right or secure by his own efforts without a divine gift of grace.

Thus the natural man starts with a temperament which is not in itself evil, but is entirely centred on himself. Even where he has impulses towards unselfishness, his tendency to gratify them is selfish in the sense that he only acts upon them because it pleases him to do so. He regards himself as the centre of all things and the world as existing for his benefit. The Christian life, on its ethical side, consists ultimately in nothing less than the substitution

for this natural view of the realisation of the truth that man exists not for himself, but for God, by comparison **with whom** he is as nothing, and, under God, for his **neighbour** no less than for himself.

In itself the fact that he has this natural tendency to self-centredness or this natural view of life constitutes no reason why man should need penitence. He is what God has made him. Even if the work of God has been to some extent impaired by sinful surroundings before he reaches the aid of reason, he is not to blame for the fact. If man could pass from the natural view of life to the supernatural without ever yielding to the tendency to gratify his natural impulses in circumstances where it is wrong for him to do so, he would have no need to repent, for he would have no sins of which to repent. It is the fact of sin that makes penitence and forgiveness a necessary part of the Christian life.

IV. SIN

SIN consists ultimately in disobedience to the will of God. The sinner need not be explicitly conscious of the fact that he is disobeying the divine will; often he is only generally and vaguely aware of the fact that he is disobeying the voice of conscience or doing what he knows or feels to be wrong. The knowledge of good and evil can exist without any clear recognition of the existence of God. None the less the ultimate sanction of the distinction of good and evil is that the good is that which is in harmony with the nature of God as revealed in Christ, while evil is that which is contrary to or inconsistent with it. It is a fact of daily experience that our life contains a number of incidents in which to a greater or less extent and with greater or less consciousness and deliberation we gratify our natural inclinations by doing what we know to be contrary to the will of God or at least generally recognise to be wrong or evil or by neglecting to do what we know to be the will of God or recognise as right or good. To a greater or less degree these failures to live up to the standard which we are bound as Christians to accept and to follow are sins. (In ordinary theological language these are called "actual sins" as against original sin.)

It is obvious that such failures to live up to the

ideal of the Christian life may vary almost infinitely in their gravity from the gravest and most outrageous crimes to trivial lapses of thought. It must however be remembered that the gravity of sin cannot be measured by ordinary standards such as must inevitably be applied by human law. Human law must in the main judge of the gravity of crimes by the extent to which they injure society; it cannot judge with certainty of such matters as the urgency of the temptation, the extent to which the capacity to resist temptation was impaired by causes over which the offender had no control, or on the other hand the extent to which his past circumstances ought to have enabled the offender to resist temptation more successfully than he did. It is indeed true that human law considers these circumstances to some extent; but it is only possible to judge accurately where there is a full and perfect insight into the mind of the sinner. Consequently law can at best only form a rough estimate of the degree of guilt attaching to any particular crime. On the other hand the judge of sins is God, who has perfect knowledge of the precise state of the mind and soul of the sinner and the extent to which any particular sin is a defiance of His will. From this it follows that the gravity of any particular sin can only be fully known by God. For its gravity depends not merely on the nature of the act itself, but on the circumstances which may either have extenuated or aggravated it. It is perfectly possible that the open and notorious sins of those brought up in vicious

surroundings are in God's sight less grievous than the comparatively trifling lapses of those who have had every opportunity of living up to the highest Christian standards. Further, law is only concerned with offences against society, and even so only with those that are of such gravity that it is necessary to punish them for the preservation of society. But we can sin not only against our neighbour, but against God Himself. Our Lord, in the Gospel, denounces sins of self-righteousness and pride quite as vehemently as sins against charity, and denounces sins of word and thought no less than sins of overt action. This need not mean that, for instance, the man who says to his brother "Thou fool" is as guilty in the sight of God as he would have been if he had murdered him. It does mean that in certain cases the lesser sin of one who has had every opportunity may be as grave as the apparently greater sin of one who has had few or none. The ultimate gravity of any sin is only known to God.

Traditional theology has endeavoured to divide sins into the two categories of mortal and venial. By mortal sins in the first instance were meant those grave and scandalous crimes which it was regarded as unthinkable that a Christian should commit—fornication, murder, and idolatry. These sins were regarded as cutting the offender off from the Church; he could hardly hope at best for more than reconciliation at the hour of death. The later development of Catholic theology extended the category of mortal sins, so as to include grave

offences against the other Christian virtues. But here a very serious difficulty arises. On the one hand mortal sin is regarded as being a sin of such gravity and committed with such full deliberation and knowledge of its malice that by committing it the sinner openly defies the will of God and cuts himself off from all hope of salvation unless he repents. No doubt there are such sins; but it is clear that God alone can judge whether even in the gravest sins, such, for example, as murder, the sinner may not have been carried away by sudden passion or overwhelming provocation. On the other hand, in practice theologians have attempted to find external tests by which it can be judged whether a sin is mortal or venial; the test is made the gravity of the act in itself apart from the frame of mind in which it is committed. In practice as a guide in dealing with souls the distinction is useful, and corresponds roughly to the obvious fact that some sins are at any given moment worse than others. For example, if my neighbour annoys me it is a sin for me to be irritated in my thoughts about him. But it is worse if I swear at him, and still worse if I strike him. But the rough-and-ready rule which would class the first as venial, the last as mortal, while judging the middle as mortal or venial according to the extent to which I use really blasphemous or filthy language is a mere external test, similar to that used by human law, and has little or no relation to the gravity of the sin in the sight of God, who knows how far the temptation carried me

away—it may have been that my neighbour had provoked me by a long series of annoyances—my own natural difficulty in controlling my temper, and the various considerations which decide the actual quality of my action. It may be that I have exercised almost heroic restraint in only swearing at him without striking him; it may equally well be the case that the graces I have received and the spiritual progress I have made make it unjustifiable for me to feel the smallest degree of resentment.

Thus the traditional classification can only be retained either if it is confined to a distinction in the quality of man's actions which can never be known to any but God, or if it be used as a rough-and-ready means of distinguishing certain degrees in the outward manifestations of actions which are convenient as a practical guide. For instance, if a penitent has to confess, among other sins, the habit of drunkenness, it is probably more urgent that he should endeavour to eradicate this vice than to conquer occasional fits of ill-temper. The distinction here however may correspond to the gravity of the sins in God's sight, but it is perfectly possible that it does not. This, of course, does not imply that the Christian need not be seriously concerned about sins of an open and outrageous character. Rather it means that he must recognise the possibility that even sins which the world as such hardly reprobates at all may in the sight of God be very grave indeed. Sins of malicious and uncharitable gossip may be very grave, though the world may regard them as

a harmless foible or even as brilliance in conversation. The Christian has never passed from the need of penitence as long as he is failing in any detail, however apparently small, to live in accordance with the mind of Christ, and he can never be certain that what is apparently small is small in the sight of God, who knows precisely how much grace he has received, and how far his sins are rendered inexcusable by his opportunities. The confusion between the two uses of the distinction is liable to be a serious danger to the Christian life, since it tends to foster the conception of God as a ruler who is easily provoked and easily pacified, which is obviously the conception of the Old Testament rather than of the New.

A more important distinction is that between sins of malice, sins of infirmity, and sins of ignorance. Clearly, sins committed deliberately and with a full knowledge of their wickedness are worse than sins committed in a moment of overwhelming temptation, except in so far as it is the fault of the sinner for one reason or another that the temptation has acquired its strength. If, for example, my inability to resist the temptation to an open sin against the virtue of purity is due to a long indulgence in thoughts of a similar character which it would have been comparatively easy to resist, I cannot simply plead the fact that the temptation was too strong for me as an excuse. It was largely my fault that it possessed so much strength as it did. The general

difference between sins of malice and sins of infirmity is illustrated by the actions of Judas Iscariot and St. Peter in betraying and denying Our Lord, assuming the correctness of the traditional view of their characters and motives, which there seems no reason to doubt. In the one case we have a deliberate betrayal of a friend and master for the sake of money, in the other a failure to act up to the demands of loyalty in a sudden crisis of overwhelming fear. To these two classes of sin may be added sins of ignorance. Of course there can be no sin where an action which is contrary to the will of God is performed in complete ignorance of the fact that it is contrary to His will. On the other hand there is very real and serious sin where ignorance is due to failure, either through laziness or interested motives, to see what the will of God is and to apply it to the circumstances of one's own position. The Pharisees were guilty in their rejection of Jesus because they ought to have seen in Him at least a messenger of God, who had done no evil and a vast amount of good. By allowing their prejudices to distort the good He had done into evil they deprived themselves of the opportunity of seeing in Him anything more than a false prophet; their ignorance was due to pride and prejudice, and therefore it was a guilty ignorance. It should be observed that the social and political evils of modern society spring largely from the same source. The pursuit of private interests frequently leads men who are sincere and upright in their personal lives to defend institutions which

are quite clearly contrary to the mind of Christ. The diplomacy which allowed the war to happen was only rendered possible by the fact that several generations of European statesmen, and the nations they represented, refused to recognise the fact that they were working on unchristian principles. It is, of course, impossible to assess the precise guilt of particular individuals in the matter; but the result illustrates the disastrous effects of sins committed in an ignorance which was really guilty, since the courage to think clearly and to speak openly would have averted the ultimate disaster. Such failures may be quite as guilty in the sight of God as the private sins which human society is ready to condemn, even though it may be difficult or impossible for man to assign the guilt of them to any particular individual. There is, perhaps, no need so urgent at the present time as that Christians should recognise the duty of thinking clearly and unselfishly on the problems of the world in general, and should see that any failure to do so is a definite form of sin.

V. THE NEED OF PENITENCE

SIN consists of disobedience to the will of God or failure of any kind to conform to it, in so far as that failure is due to our own conscious actions. The natural state of imperfection in which man finds himself at the outset of his life as a Christian may be a state which is very far below the divine pattern, but it cannot be described as sinful in the proper sense, except in cases where a man who has not previously professed himself a Christian has none the less acted on various occasions against his conscience. It is, of course, common at the present day to find such people, and in them, although their failure to live in accordance with the will of God may not be so reprehensible as in the case of professing Christians, it is none the less sin. In such cases a man's inevitable natural imperfection may often have been increased by his own voluntary actions. In the same way Christians may, and often do by their carelessness and lack of adequate repentance and amendment, increase that natural state of imperfection which is inevitable to human nature. In either case there is need of penitence for those actions by which the raw material of our character has been made worse by our own conscious actions. But in itself the imperfection of our nature is no

reason for penitence. It may equally well be regarded as a necessary condition of the formation of the Christian character; for, at any rate in so far as we can see, the labour of overcoming the temptations which arise from our natural imperfection and the difficult struggle which obedience to the will of God involves are a necessary condition of attaining to Christian holiness. The consideration of this natural state may indeed rightly produce sorrow and the desire to attain to a higher state, but it does not, in the strict sense, call for penitence.

For penitence in its proper sense is the opposite of sin. It is the act by which the sinner who has disobeyed the will of God reverses his will and comes back with sorrow from the state of rebellion to the state of obedience. The classical description of penitence in the New Testament is the parable of the Prodigal Son, in which the journey to a far country and the return from it express in a dramatic form the conception of sin as an abandonment of God and of penitence as an act of returning to Him.

In theory, as has been noticed above, penitence is not a necessary part of the Christian life. For it is of the essence of sin that the sinner should, at the moment when he yielded to temptation, have had the power to resist it. Even when he has yielded to what has been described as overwhelming temptation, he had really the power to resist it, and was conscious of the fact. If he was absolutely without power to resist, he would not be guilty of sin, any more than a man would be who was compelled by

someone physically stronger than himself to point and fire a revolver at his dearest friend. But when we speak of overwhelming temptations we mean temptations that the sinner was too weak to resist, although all the time he was conscious that it was in his power to do so. Now, if this is so, it is clearly possible in theory that the Christian should, by the grace of God, resist each temptation as it comes, and so attain by a process of continual progress to the full attainment of perfection. In practice, however, man's experience of failure is so universal that it may be said that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and that there is no one who is not conscious in his own case of the need of penitence for his innumerable failures. Thus the universality of sin is such that it is not surprising that the Christian dispensation should open with the message: "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." For although the world before the Incarnation did not possess the same full knowledge of the will of God and the same means of grace as the Christian dispensation provides, yet the light of conscience was sufficient to reveal to men their sins and to make them desire the means of overcoming them. The welcome given to the Gospel proves how widely spread was the desire for a better way of life, both among Jews and Gentiles. The Jews possessed in the law a standard of righteousness which, at its best interpretation, fell little short of the Christian ideal; but it was lacking in one essential feature in that it did not provide men with

a motive strong enough to inspire them to live up to that ideal. In the case of the Gentiles there was, on the one hand, an incredibly low moral level in society as a whole, and, on the other, a wide desire to find some means of escaping from a state of degradation which men hated even while they could not rise above it.

Although the general conditions of modern society are in many respects superior to those of the ancient world, it does not follow that there is any less need of the message at the present time. For it must be repeated that from the Christian point of view sin is not confined to the obvious and blatant forms of vice. The ordinary forms of selfishness and uncharitableness can separate man's soul from God as effectively as any other form of sin. In one sense indeed they may well be more dangerous, for the simple reason that it is easier to ignore them. They do not come into conflict with that sense of natural self-respect which is often a valuable ally in assisting a man to overcome the more degraded vices, but is a very serious enemy when it comes to the question of living up to the perfect humility and self-sacrifice which is involved in the Christian ideal of sharing in the Cross of Jesus. Penitence is always needed in the Christian life until we have completely conquered our natural self-love, as it manifests itself in almost daily failures to live up to the Christian ideal.

Consequently repentance must always be the beginning of the Christian message. A good deal of

nonsense is frequently to be heard at the present time to the effect that traditional Christianity is too much occupied with a "sin-complex." It may be true that the Gospel is sometimes preached as though penitence was not only the beginning but the end of the Christian life, and as though the task of the Christian was to overcome sin rather than to attain to the perfection of the Christian character. But this is a criticism merely of occasional distortions of the Christian message, not of the message itself. It is, indeed, absurd to represent the foundation as if it were the whole building; but it is equally absurd to suppose that any building can stand without a foundation. And penitence is the foundation on which the edifice of the Christian character must be built.

VI. THE NATURE OF PENITENCE

PENITENCE, as we have seen, is the act by which we return from a state of rebellion against the will of God to a state of obedience. But the Christian conception of God invests it with a certain character of its own. A philosopher with high ethical ideals, who identified those ideals with the divine nature, would recognise the necessity of turning his will away from actions contrary to that nature. But he might at the same time think of God primarily as a supreme ethical ideal without that definite and vivid conception of God as a Personal Being, which is an essential part of the Christian revelation. For the Christian God is, on the one hand, a loving Father and, on the other hand, the divine Lover revealed to us in the Lord Jesus. Sin is for the Christian not merely a failure to live up to a moral ideal, but treason to a personal friend and master. Consequently penitence must always carry with it a sense of personal sorrow for an injury done, not to an abstract ideal, nor even to a benevolent but remote ruler, but to One who has died for our own salvation.

It is not, however, to be supposed that penitence is only genuine if it is accompanied by a keen sense of sorrow of an emotional character. It is often necessary for the preacher to appeal to this emotion,

in order to arouse the penitence of his hearers; the necessity of such an appeal may perhaps be over-estimated in some types of popular evangelistic preaching, but it will always remain a necessary means of attempting to arouse the careless and indifferent to a sense of sin. In itself, however, penitence should consist not so much of emotional sorrow as of a rational recognition of the nature of our sins as acts of rebellion against the will of God, and a firm determination to avoid the repetition of them in future. It should be observed that this involves a determination in certain cases to avoid the occasions of sin—that is, the circumstances in which experience has shown that we cannot hope to avoid or overcome temptation. Naturally the extent to which it is possible or desirable to do this varies with the nature of the temptation. It is, for instance, obviously necessary for a habitual drunkard who desires to reform to avoid the public-house in which he is certain to meet friends who will inevitably encourage him to drink to excess. It may be desirable for me, at least for a time, to avoid meeting a person with whom I am almost certain to lose my temper. On the other hand, it may be impossible and wrong for me to try to avoid a near relative who tries me in this way. In general however it is true that to avoid the occasions of sin, or if I cannot avoid them to foresee them and arm myself against them in advance, is a necessary part of penitence. Clearly, my penitence is a mere sham unless it includes a deliberate reversal of my previous act of

rebellion, in the form of a firm resolution not to repeat it. But such a resolution can scarcely be a very firm one if it does not include a resolution to avoid, so far as possible, circumstances in which I am morally certain to sin again, at least until I have strengthened my will sufficiently to have a reasonable hope of resisting temptation.

It is important to emphasise the fact that penitence consists mainly in the rational regret for the act of rebellion against God which sin involves and the resolution to do better in future, for the reason that Christians are frequently troubled by the fact that they do not feel any very strong sense of sorrow. They are liable to think that there is something wanting in their penitence, and to make laborious efforts to induce it by the use of forms of devotion calculated to produce this effect. This is, of course, to reverse the logical order. An emotional sense of sorrow is of value just in so far as it enables us to recognise the inherent evil of our sins and strengthens our purpose not to sin again. If we already recognise sin in its true character and are resolved to avoid it, there can be no need of arousing in addition an emotional outburst of sorrow. Such an outburst is in itself worthless; it is only of value if it leads on to something better. Where we already have something better, it is obviously futile to waste our energies in endeavouring to produce the merely emotional sense of sorrow, the presence or absence of which is largely a matter of individual temperament. Where, indeed, the penitent has in

the past lived a life of more or less open defiance of the will of God and has been more or less suddenly aroused to a sense of the love of God as revealed in the Cross and his own ingratitude, the emotional sense of sorrow is hardly likely to be absent. But it may very well tend to disappear as he advances in the Christian life and his sins become less frequent and less obvious. This, however, is no sign of any diminution in the depth of his penitence.

Ideally, penitence would involve such a full recognition of the gravity of sin as an act of disobedience to the will of God, and such a firm purpose of amendment, that the sinner could hardly fall away again; at any rate, he could hardly fall into a repetition of the same sin. It is, indeed, not uncommon to find cases in which a person who has for a long time practised some form of vice is enabled to overcome his vicious habit or habits by a sudden act of dramatic penitence. The moral upheaval involved in the psychological experience known as "conversion" sometimes produces this effect, which may also be observed in the case of first confessions. But this is by no means inevitably the case, and where it does not occur it is no proof that the penitence was not genuine. It may perfectly well be true that even where it does occur it is no proof that the penitence involved was more sincere than that of the man who finds that he still has a long and difficult struggle before his temptation is finally overcome. It must be remembered that such cases usually involve a definitely morbid

psychological state; this state may be cured by a first confession or by the experience of "conversion." It may also be cured by psycho-analysis. But penitence and forgiveness are needed for sins which are not in any sense due to morbid psychological states, and it is not their primary function to provide a kind of mental healing.

Consequently, the fact that penitence has not produced complete victory over temptation is no proof that it was not genuine, so far as it went. It does, indeed, prove that it was imperfect; but perfect penitence, in the sense of a full recognition of the horror of sin and an absolute resolve to avoid it for the future, would only be possible for one who had already attained to complete perfection. Penitence is essentially needed by those who are only travelling towards Christian holiness; and it cannot be expected that they will attain easily to perfect penitence. It would, indeed, be impossible to attain to it without a perfect love of God; and the perfect love of God is the end of our Christian pilgrimage, not a stage upon the journey. There is, therefore, no reason for the penitent to give way to depression because he finds that he is continually relapsing into sin. He must, indeed, recognise that this is a proof that he still has much to learn in the way of penitence, but it is no proof that his penitence is lacking in sincerity. It is, of course, true that a penitent who really made no progress at all would be lacking in sincerity; but whether we are making progress or not is a matter which is only

known to God and cannot be judged merely by our success or failure in overcoming temptation. If we are honestly trying to avoid the occasions of sin and to resist temptation, and if we are sincerely sorry for our failures, then in fact we are making progress, although we may not be able to measure it. As long as we continue to endeavour to attain to Christian holiness to the best of our ability, we are in fact drawing nearer to the goal, even though it may at moments seem to be more remote than it was in the past.

Penitence, then, is the act of the will by which we return from that state of rebellion against God which is involved in our sins; it is based on the recognition of the fact that by sinning we have rejected the love of God, and injured One who has never shown anything but love towards us. It can hardly fail to be accompanied by emotional sorrow; but the extent to which such sorrow is felt is largely a matter of personal temperament, and the fact that it is felt with greater or less keenness is no proof of the sincerity or lack of sincerity of our penitence. Further, penitence may be quite genuine where it amounts to little more than a recognition that our actions have been wrong, and a desire to do better in future. Such a state of penitence is perfectly genuine, though it is very far from perfect.

VII. FORGIVENESS

PENITENCE is the necessary condition of forgiveness. Without penitence of some kind on the part of the sinner it is impossible for God to forgive the sinner. This does not mean that God is to be regarded as an angry tyrant who must be appeased by repentance if His wrath is to be turned away. The love of God for man does not cease because he sins; such a conception is contrary to the whole Christian conception of the atonement. "God commendeth His love towards us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." God's forgiveness, which is simply the love of God manifesting itself towards the sinner who repents, is always waiting for him to repent. But so long as man's soul remains obstinately closed against the love of God by his preference for evil rather than good, manifested in the fact that he is conscious of having sinned and yet refuses to repent, it is also closed by his own act against the love of God. It is, indeed, not entirely closed, since without the grace of God repentance would be impossible; it is only because some element of the divine love is still able to find its way into the soul of the sinner that he can find a place for repentance at all. Our Lord, indeed, warns us that there is a sin against the Holy Ghost which has no forgiveness. But this warning is addressed to

those who saw His works of healing and declared that His power to cast out devils was itself of diabolical origin. It would seem that the sin referred to is the state of mind of those who so deliberately blind themselves by prejudice that they are ready to regard as evil that which is manifestly good. In other words, it is the state of those who adhere so obstinately to their sins that it is impossible for them even to see the need of repentance. The impossibility of forgiveness is due not to the fact that the anger of God cannot be placated, but to the fact that the sinner has allowed himself to come to a state of mind in which it is impossible for him to repent.

But apart from the possibility of falling into such a state the love of God does not cease to draw the sinner to repentance, although it is still always possible for the sinner to remain impenitent and so to make it impossible for the love of God to enter his heart and restore him to the full enjoyment of the love of God. Here, indeed, there is a considerable difficulty in much of the language of traditional devotion. It has been seen that penitence is a state of the soul which may, and indeed must, vary in intensity. The man who turns from a life of sin to the first beginning of a Christian life may be sincerely penitent. But it is quite possible that he will have a very inadequate conception of the goodness and majesty of God and a very inadequate conception of the extent to which his sins have violated that goodness and majesty. He may have a

considerable love for his old sins, which it may take years of painful struggle to eradicate. This does not mean that his penitence is not sincere, or that the love of God does not forgive him. But the ordinary language of devotion suggests that he has by a single act of repentance obtained an absolute and complete forgiveness. It is true, in a sense, that he has been forgiven. But he has not been completely forgiven, not in the sense that God withholds some part of His love from him, but in the sense that his soul is still very far from being in a state in which it can be fully opened to the love of God. As long as any incompleteness in man's repentance remains, so long does he remain incompletely reconciled to God, because there are still large tracts of his nature over which the love of God has no control.

It is not, of course, to be supposed that this is necessarily the case with all those who repent after a life of sin. Only God Himself can judge of the completeness or incompleteness of the repentance of a sinner. So long as it is in any sense and to any extent genuine and sincere he is forgiven. There is joy in heaven among the angels of God over any sinner who repents. But the experience of most readers will tell them how very inadequate their penitence often is. This is no cause for despair; only a perfect saint could be a perfect penitent. But it is a cause for seeking continually to grow in penitence; in sorrow for our past sins, and firmness in our purpose of amendment. By growing in this way we are growing in the love of God by bringing

our souls into fuller submission to Him, and so enabling His love to obtain a fuller dominion over us.

Thus the forgiveness of God is not to be regarded as the reluctant consent of an offended deity to forego the punishment which He has a right to exact from the sinner, but the spontaneous return of the love of God to the soul which has cut itself off from that love by sinning by refusing to repent. The state of separation from God which results from sin may be described as "the wrath of God," in the sense that the sinner is cut off from God and is in a state of hostility to Him. It is, however, misleading, since it inevitably suggests the Old Testament conception of an angry deity, who hates the sinner and seeks to punish him, unless the sinner seizes the opportunity of repenting before the vengeance of God has time to strike him. Such conceptions in the Old Testament may well represent a higher conception of God than those which preceded them; it is, for instance, a higher conception of God to regard Him as enforcing righteous conduct by punishment of evil than as an entirely non-moral being who can be persuaded by the correct offering of sacrifice to do precisely what the worshipper desires. Thus in the Old Testament such language has its place as representing a stage in the development of religious thought in Judaism. It is natural that it should meet us in the New Testament, the language of which is largely drawn from the Jewish Scriptures. But it represents a conception

of God which is below the general level of the New Testament, and can only be justified if re-interpreted in the light of its higher conceptions.

It must, however, be remembered that the language of the Old Testament has a real value as against some modern views which would practically abolish all sense of human responsibility and represent the love of God as a kind of mild benevolence which takes no serious account of the sins of mankind. Such views are as far from the truth as the Old Testament conception of God as a vengeful and angry tyrant who exacts full retribution for any offence against His dignity. The fact that sin alienates man from God and preserves a barrier between the soul and God which can only be removed by penitence, is essential to any understanding of Christianity. But the separation is due to the action of man in using the freedom which God has given him in order to rebel against God. God Himself cannot override man's freedom, and thus the barrier remains until man removes it. Since there can be no greater evil for man than to be cut off from the love of God, for which he was created, it is impossible to exaggerate the disastrous effects of sin; it is hardly worse to ascribe those effects to the anger of God than to deny that they exist or that they are to be regarded with the utmost horror.

It must, of course, be understood that the extent to which sin separates the soul of man from God until he repents depends on the gravity of the sin.

But it must also be remembered that the gravity of the sin cannot be estimated simply by the external tests which are properly applied in many cases by human law. Indeed, it would be more near the truth to say that the gravity of a sin depends on the extent to which it separates the soul of the sinner from God. This must mainly depend on the extent to which he realises the quality of his action before he commits it and yet perseveres in it in spite of his full consciousness that his action is contrary to the will of God or the dictates of his own conscience, due allowance being made for the fact that the sinner may be responsible for having allowed himself, by a prolonged indulgence in small sins, to reach a state in which he is unable to resist a sudden temptation to a graver sin of the same kind. Here he may act with little deliberation or consciousness of his guilt; but he is responsible for the fact that his conscience has deteriorated by his prolonged indulgence in minor sins of this particular kind. In general, however, it is obvious that it is only the graver sins, understood in the sense of sins committed with a clear understanding of their gravity, that can completely separate a soul from God. It may, indeed, be doubted whether in the last resort any sin can have this effect, except the deliberate persistence in the choice of a way of life in which the sinner so completely identifies himself with evil that he ceases to have any desire for the love of God or for goodness in any form. Whether indeed it be possible for man to arrive at

such a complete state of selfishness and indifference to all claims of goodness that he could have no desire to repent, it is difficult to say. But short of this there is no sin which completely separates the soul from the love of God to the extent of making it impossible for him to repent. On the other hand, any really grave sin—in the sense of the words given above—must to a very considerable extent separate the soul from God until the sinner repents; all too often the effect of yielding to temptation includes an unwillingness to repent among its disastrous consequences. But with any sincere and adequate measure of repentance the soul receives immediate forgiveness, in the sense that it is restored to the love of God. On the other hand, such forgiveness is still incomplete, in the sense that until repentance is perfect the soul is not capable of admitting to itself the fulness of the divine love. That love is not withheld by God, but the soul is incapable of receiving it.

(*Note.*—It might be held that the view of sin put forward in the foregoing chapter and elsewhere in this book tends to encourage the state of mind known to the theologians as “scrupulousness,” in which the soul regards trivial and often quite imaginary lapses from the highest ideals as serious sins against God. To this objection it may be replied that any adequate conception of sin must involve this danger. Unless grave sins are confined to definite and actual breaches of the Ten Commandments it is always possible for persons of peculiarly

tender conscience to regard their faults as more serious than they really are. Now any adequate view of sin must recognise that, for example, malicious and uncharitable gossip may be a very serious sin against charity. But there is no external standard by which we can discriminate between such gossip and the duty of criticising unfavourably the character of some person when we are asked whether he is suitable for some position. The distinction, as also the point at which indulgence in malicious gossip ceases to be quite trifling and becomes a really serious sin, is not one which can be decided by anything but our own conscience, with the help of such advice as we may think it necessary to obtain, if we are uncertain in our own mind. Scrupulousness is a morbid state of mind and of conscience, representing the opposite extreme to the conscience which sees no harm in actions which are obviously evil in their effects on the character of the sinner and society in general. It can only be cured by careful and sympathetic treatment, not by attempting to set up an external standard by which the gravity of sins in general can be judged. It may, indeed, be a proper method of treatment in such cases to prescribe certain standards by which the patient can calm his own conscience, as for instance to tell him that if his indulgence in some trifling sin of thought did not occupy his mind for more than five minutes it cannot have been a serious sin. But this or similar tests can only be applied to

cases where we are dealing with a definitely morbid state; it is impossible to construct definite rules which will enable us in any normal state to decide whether a sin was mortal or venial in the full sense.

On the other hand, the individual is not simply confined to his own judgment in regard to the gravity of any particular sin. It may indeed be impossible to judge that any particular sin is mortal in the only true sense of the word for any but God Himself. But the general consent of the Church as drawn from the teaching of the Bible gives quite clear and definite guidance to conscience. This tradition, in its main content, is impressed on the young in their education, and is brought home to the individual still further by the general consent of the Christian society about him. Thus it is seldom possible for the individual to have any doubt that a particular sin is of so serious a character as to demand a greater degree of penitence than some quite trivial lapse, and a more serious effort to avoid it in future. Although it may not have been mortal in the full sense, he will be conscious of its gravity; and clearly there could be no more dangerous way of falling into the gravest danger of complete loss of the love of God than to acquiesce without repentance and attempt at amendment in gravely sinful habits. The normal conscience will seldom be at a loss to judge of the extent to which any particular sin is of a serious gravity, though here again it may be necessary in the case of one who has continued to live in habits

of sin for a long time to rouse him to a recognition of the fact. Of course a problem of this kind might well occur among converts from heathenism; but such cases would demand a wider treatment than can be given here and a knowledge which I cannot claim. In a normal civilised society the danger is not the failure to recognise the gravity of obviously serious sins, but the ignoring of the possible gravity of sins which society condones but the Gospel condemns, such as self-righteousness or uncharitableness of judgment.)

VIII. THE NEED OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

THE foregoing chapters provide the reasons which give its value to the practice of the specific confession of sins to the authorised representative of the Church, which is commonly known as the Sacrament of Penance, or "going to Confession." The former term is not perhaps accurate if the word "sacrament" is used in the sense in which it is defined by the Thirty-nine Articles, since no "visible sign or ceremony ordained of God" is employed in it, but the use of the term in Roman Catholic theology has been too generally adopted to make it necessary or desirable to find an alternative. The legitimacy of the practice in the Church of England is too clearly stated in Anglican documents to need any further defence.

In the first place, penitence is necessary as a means of obtaining the divine gift of forgiveness, which we exclude from our souls so long as we continue in sin without repentance. On the other hand we admit that gift and the reconciliation to God which it brings by repentance, though the extent to which we admit it depends on the depth and sincerity of our repentance. But at this point we are faced by difficulties. How can I be certain, so long as penitence is regarded simply as an attitude

of the soul or a psychological state, that its depth and sincerity is sufficient to obtain forgiveness? It is not, indeed, always easy to be sure that my state of reaction against a sin is really penitence at all; it is easy to confuse penitence with a sense of wounded vanity that one so admirable as myself should have demeaned himself to commit so degrading a sin. This state of mind can easily be worked up into an emotional sense of disgust which is often mistaken for penitence, but is very different from it. After all, it is ultimately based on pride, whereas penitence is based on humility. Further, there is no means of judging the depth and sincerity of penitence. Any attempt to do so is bound to end in the attempt to excite an intense outburst of emotion; but such outbursts, even if we can produce them, are of little value in the religious life. They disappear rapidly without leaving any very firm foundation for our purposes of amendment. Their intensity is no real clue to the extent to which I really recognise my sin for what it is or to the strength of my purpose to avoid it in future.

Thus penitence, without some concrete form of expressing itself, may easily be confined to a mere outburst of emotional sorrow, which leaves little effect on the soul after it has exhausted itself. It may involve a great deal of effort to work ourselves up into such states, or it may involve very little. If it involves much effort, the effect of the effort may indeed have some value; but there is the danger that the soul may grow weary of so laborious a

proceeding. If it involves little effort, the effect of such outbursts will probably be very transient. But, in either case, there is a further difficulty. If the only test of the sincerity of my penitence is the intensity of the emotional sorrow I feel for it, there can clearly be no standard to which I can appeal as a means of judging whether my repentance for any particular sin has been adequate or not. But unless I have repented adequately I cannot claim to have been forgiven. There seems no method by which I can be assured that I have received forgiveness, unless indeed I have the hardiness to suppose that because I have some sense of peace and forgiveness at the end my repentance has been adequate. Consequently, I am bound, it would seem, to go on repenting of particular sins again and again. But it is an elementary fact of psychology that the worst way to break myself of a bad habit of any kind is to think about it. The mere fact of thinking about it revives its attractiveness for me. I may begin by thinking about it with sorrow and disgust; but it is easy for my mind to wander off into a fresh yielding to temptation. To give an obvious example: if I have yielded to a serious sin of anger against my neighbour, my repentance may begin in a frame of mind which can be simply expressed in the words, "O God, I am very sorry that I lost my temper so badly this morning." But this thought may very easily wander off into a recollection of the real or supposed injuries which led to my being angry; and

this consideration may easily lead to a fresh outburst of indignation which is, to a greater or less degree, a repetition of my former sin. This danger is particularly noticeable in the case of those habitual temptations to impurity or intemperance which have a strong appeal to the lower side of our nature. The person who is fighting against the habit of taking drugs will, in such circumstances, easily pass from repentance into the thought that it cannot matter if I do it just once more. Thus what began as penitence may easily end as a repetition of my sin.

It is hardly possible to exaggerate the dangers into which such emotional broodings over past sins may lead us. Yet at the same time it may very well be doubted if even these dangers are worse than the spiritual pride which presumes to claim that we are certain that our sins have been forgiven without any assurance from outside our own personal conscience and the fluctuations of the emotional side of our nature. In the last resort the impenitent publican is not in so dangerous a spiritual condition as the impenitent Pharisee.

On the other hand, the Sacrament of Penance provides a method of repentance which enables us to be certain that our sins have been forgiven up to a point at which it is no longer necessary for us to brood over them in particular. It does not relieve us from the duty of approaching God in the attitude of penitents, an attitude which will last for the whole of our lives. We can never dare to

approach God except as penitents. But we have the assurance that the cost of humiliation involved in the confession of our sins to a fellow-sinner and the performance of the penance imposed by him is sufficient to relieve us from the burden of remembering again and again the detailed sins of our past and repenting of them again at the imminent risk of exposing us to fresh temptation. In receiving absolution our sins are completely pardoned in one sense, while in another sense we feel that it is still only as penitents that we can enter into the presence of God.

Hitherto we have been considering the use of the Sacrament of Penance simply from the point of view of the relation of the individual soul to God. Important as these relations are they are not the only ones to be considered. Among much that is of the utmost value in the evangelical tradition of Christianity in which the majority of English people have been educated, there is one serious deficiency—the lack of emphasis on the corporate aspect of Christianity. No man lives to himself or dies to himself, if he is a Christian; he is a member of a corporate society, the Church of God. And that society is not merely a human association for the maintenance and propagation of the Christian faith, similar in its character to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel or the Church Missionary Society. It is the mystical Body of Christ—a society whose members are united, not only to one another, but to the Lord Himself, by a bond of

union which is closer than all ties of human kinship. The Church is nothing less than the visible form in which Christ manifests Himself to the world. Hence any act of rebellion is an offence which not only impairs his own communion with God, but brings shame on the whole Body of Christ and on Christ Himself as Head of the Body. It is thus only right that the penitent sinner should confess his sins to one who is the appointed representative of Our Lord Himself and of His mystical Body, in order that by his formal apology and reparation he may, to the best of his ability, undo the wrong that he has done to them by his sins. Obviously this argument will not appeal to those who have not learnt by the experience of the Christian life to understand the full meaning of the conception of the Church as the Body of Christ; to many of those who are contemplating making use of the Sacrament of Penance for the first time it may mean little or nothing. But they must recognise that the truth and value of the conception is vouched for by a vast body of Christian experience, and is one of the main themes of apostolic Christianity, which they will learn to appreciate better as they grow in the practice of the faith.

This consideration alone is enough to throw very grave doubt on the common argument that if we have confessed our sins to God alone it is unnecessary to confess them to man as well. On the other hand, it might be urged that private confession of our sins to God, coupled with the formal

confession of sins provided in the liturgical worship of the Church, satisfies both requirements; since it provides a public and formal act of apology before the whole Church as well as our private confession of our sins to God. A fairly large body of Anglican opinion would hold this view, while admitting that the use of the Sacrament of Penance is a perfectly legitimate and desirable thing for those who feel the need of it. But the claim that, if we have confessed our sins to God, it cannot be necessary to confess them to man, although it contains a measure of truth, is not really relevant. It assumes that it is an easy matter to realise the presence of God in our private prayers, and that the sensation of the closeness of God which the beginner in the Christian life may, and often does, realise in his prayers can be regarded as a genuine realisation of His presence. Neither assumption is justifiable. Any Christian who has seriously entered on the attempt to pray is acutely aware of the fact that although as a matter of faith we know that God is present at all times and in all places, yet it is the hardest possible thing to be conscious of His presence. It is only those who have travelled very far along the road of the Christian life who can ever claim to enjoy any real or abiding sense of God's presence; and from them it is often veiled. Again, while even the beginner is from time to time vouchsafed a sense of the presence of God in his prayers, such moments are very transitory, and little more than waves of devotional enthusiasm of a very emotional character. They are known to

theologians as "sensible devotion," and while we should regard them as marks of the love of God, sent to encourage us to go forward on our pilgrimage, we should be very far wrong if we regarded them as special privileges vouchsafed to ourselves or as proofs that we were at such moments nearer to God than at any other times.

Consequently, the idea that it is sufficient to confess our sins to God alone breaks down in the face of the fact that though God indeed is present with us when we pray, we are not present with Him. We have no such consciousness of His presence as would make it possible for us to feel any part of that sorrow which we ought to feel. The experience of most of those who have grown up in the ordinary point of view of Anglicans—that it is sufficient to confess our sins to God alone—and have gone on in later life for the first time to the use of the Sacrament of Penance is that the practice of Confession to another human being is to produce an entirely new reality to their confessions of sin, which was absent before. Indeed, one of the main reasons which has led to the revival of the practice on a large scale in the Church of England in the last century is that it satisfies the need of man for some adequate method of confessing his sins to God far more adequately than the mere confession of them in private prayer or in the formal confessions provided in the worship of the Church. These methods of confessing our sins are, of course, valuable and necessary parts of our private prayers and

our public worship; but experience shows that many have found them painfully inadequate as the only method of confession, while it may be doubted if any one who has seriously tried the method of sacramental Confession could be found to admit honestly that he could abandon it without serious damage to his spiritual life. It is, indeed, possible that in moments of sensible devotion we might be able to stir up a very keen sense of sorrow for sin, but the character of such moments is so largely emotional that the penitence which accompanied them could hardly fail to be of a very emotional character also, and therefore of little value. It may be added that anyone who could really be sure of entering at will into the presence of God in his prayers would, if he had any sense of sin—and without it, it can hardly be supposed that any man could enter into the presence of God—leap at the opportunity offered him by the Sacrament of Penance as a means of doing something to remove from his soul a consciousness of guilt which would hang like a millstone round his neck. The effect of a real conviction of sin and a real consciousness of God's presence could only be to make men "say to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb." As it is, the love of God has guided the Church into the provision of a method by which we can realise our sins and repent of them more adequately than is possible for us in our private prayers, and so come

before Him with the sure confidence that our sins are pardoned. We still come as penitents, conscious of our unworthiness, but as penitents who have received a sufficient measure of forgiveness to come with confidence before the throne of grace.

Thus to the Catholic the use of the Sacrament of Penance is the reverse of "allowing a priest to come between his soul and God." It is rather the means by which he is enabled to begin to learn how to recognise the presence of God without depending on the fluctuations of his momentary emotions. It is not for him to deny that those who seek God in other ways may not receive pardon for their sins; it is sufficient for him to know that in the Sacrament of Penance he has a means for confessing his sins of proved efficacy and value. If we could all our lives remain like little children, with their amazing power of thinking of God as if He were as near to them as their own father or mother, it might indeed be otherwise. But for most of mankind it is a toilsome and laborious struggle to return to that childlike innocence which we need in order to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

IX. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

IN the most primitive stages of Christianity it was regarded as almost impossible that a Christian could fall into really grave sin. The frequency of adult conversion and the high spiritual level at which men lived in days when to be a Christian was to expose one's self to the imminent risk of death made it natural that few should take the trouble to profess themselves Christians who did not possess a resolution and a firmness of conviction of a sufficient strength to resist temptations of the grosser form. This is the brighter side of the picture, but it must be admitted that there is a darker one. The essence of the teaching of the Gospel is that the grosser forms of sin are not the only ones. And it is impossible to read the pages of such a writer as Tertullian without being conscious of a self-righteousness which is utterly alien to the whole spirit of Our Lord. In the cases in which Christians fell into the grosser forms of sin, it was customary for Confession to be made to the bishop or to a priest appointed by him for the purpose of receiving Confessions. The penitent was ordered to fulfil a severe penance, which might be prolonged for years,

or even until the moment before his death. It included excommunication from the Sacraments of the Church, as well as rigorous fastings and other forms of penance.

With the influx of the heathen after the establishment of the peace of the Church this method of administering the forgiveness of sins by the Church began to break down. However much conservatives might lament it, or reformers seek to restore it, the fact remained that the old discipline was impossibly strict. Some Christians still had sufficiently tender consciences to repent when they had fallen into such grosser forms of sin. Others, however, had no such scruples, and did not confess their sins unless some chance scandal brought them to the notice of the authorities of the Church. In some cases, emperors or the kings of the barbarian invaders were among the offenders; and it was not every bishop who had the courage to excommunicate notorious offenders in high places. Others again like the Emperor Constantine, feared the discipline of the Church and postponed baptism until their deathbed, thus purchasing for themselves the right to live a life of sin and yet assuring themselves the power to enter into the next world in their robe of baptismal innocence, with only the slight risk of dying so suddenly that they could not be baptised in the moment of death. The whole effect of the attempt, continued for several centuries, to adhere to the old system of penance was to

inflict a heavy penalty on the genuinely penitent sinner, while the impenitent sinner went free.

Meanwhile a new and unauthorised system of penance grew up, apparently at first in the monasteries of the British Church. In these it was the custom for the monks and the dependents who clustered round the monasteries to confess their sins to the abbot or one of the monks appointed by him. Further, the system was extended from grave and scandalous offences to all sins. In the course of time, and in the face of hot opposition from the supporters of the conservative tradition, this system prevailed. The custom grew up of confessing all sins, not only the gross and obvious sins, at least once a year, either to the parish priest or to some other where others were available. In the Western Church annual Confession at Easter was enjoined on all Christians by the first Lateran Council in A.D. 1215. It may be presumed with some certainty that the practice was almost universally prevalent and accepted as a matter of course before it was formally imposed as an obligation on all Christians.

The advantage of the later practice is obvious. It emphasises the fact that sin and penance are not simply a matter of public ecclesiastical law, which can only judge of offences by external standards. Although in the past the legal point of view has been very strongly prevalent in the theology of penance, yet in practice the old idea of a system of punishment for grave offences has been replaced by contrition for all sins committed, including those

which may not seem great to the world, but may be grave in the sight of God. Penitence has been made an essential part of the Christian life, not an exceptional thing for a few rare offenders. It has indeed in modern times been found necessary in certain places to restore some of the features of the old system. While in civilised countries it is generally true that the humiliation involved in confession of grave sins, and the general acceptance in social life of the principles of Christian ethics, ensure that the penitent who has fallen into the grosser forms of sin will, if he comes to the Sacrament of Penance, be sincerely penitent, in heathen countries this has been found to be by no means the case. It seems to be possible for recent converts who have fallen back into witchcraft or polygamy or similar sins to confess them, not indeed without any penitence, but without any such measure of penitence as will furnish a guarantee that the penitent will make a sufficiently serious attempt to resist the temptation in future. Consequently, it has been found necessary in such cases to re-establish something similar to the old penitential discipline of the primitive Church. It must be borne in mind that in such cases the sins into which the penitent has fallen are not regarded as such by the society in which he lives; indeed, his neighbours may well rejoice at his return to the good old ways.

In general however the substitution of confession of all sins for the special confession of a few particularly obvious sins marks the recognition of

the fact that the principles of the Gospel refuse to regard some few special sins as particularly grave without regard to the circumstances in which they are committed or to identify the ideal of the Christian life with any particular code of conduct. It must be remembered that the decision of the Council of Jerusalem as recorded in Acts xv. represents not the standard of the ethics of the Gospel, but a compromise between that standard and the tradition of Judaism. The circumstances of the time may have necessitated such a compromise; but it fell below the teaching of Jesus and the claim of St Paul that Christian conduct consists not in the observance of any kind of law, but in the realisation of the spirit of Christ in the daily life of the Christian.

In traditional theology in the past emphasis has very largely been laid on the judicial character of the Sacrament of Penance, an emphasis which is in part due to the earlier method of administering penance. The Sacrament has been represented as the means by which the Church, acting in virtue of her divine commission, judges the sinner and either remits or retains the sins of which he has been guilty, according to her judgment as to the sincerity of his expression of contrition. To some extent this aspect must always remain, since it must always remain within the power of the Church to refuse absolution to those who confess their sins without any genuine penitence. That it should be possible for anyone to do so may seem inconceivable to

many readers, but the history of the past shows that, given a state of society in which the use of the Sacraments is regarded as a matter of course, or a rather superstitious outlook on life, in which the mere receiving of the Sacraments is supposed to have a magical efficacy, it is perfectly possible for such cases to occur. The outlook of the modern world, at any rate in Western Europe, is at the moment hardly likely to favour such a state of mind, but it would be dangerous to assume that such an attitude cannot recur; at any rate, it is always possible among those recently converted from heathenism. At present however the general tendency is in the opposite direction. The recent advances of the science of psychology, and the fact that the use of the Sacrament of Penance has in certain cases been found a valuable ally in cases requiring psycho-therapeutic treatment, has led to a tendency to regard the Sacrament as a means of healing the diseases of the soul. In a certain sense this conception is a perfectly legitimate one, since the soul was created for the attainment of the perfect standard of Christian holiness, and anything that hinders it from doing so is from one point of view alien to its true nature, and therefore a morbid condition. The Sacrament of Penance, by enabling the soul to conquer temptation and to grow in holiness, is in this sense a method of healing the diseases of the soul. But any such language is open to grave objection unless it is clearly recognised that it is metaphorical. Such devotional metaphors are

quite legitimate as long as they are recognised as such. But there is a danger at the present moment that such language may be taken to mean that the Sacrament of Penance is simply a means for delivering the soul from certain complexes of an obviously morbid character, such as would be recognised by the psycho-analyst. Or on the other hand it may tend to the view that all sins are diseases of the soul for which the sinner is not responsible. Both conceptions are entirely mistaken. Sin is not a disease of the soul in the sense that it is something which we cannot avoid; and the Sacrament of Penance exists as a means for enabling us to repent of all our sins, not for a few sins of a particular type which are due to some definitely morbid condition. Indeed, sins which were entirely due to such a condition would not, in the strict sense, be sins at all, since they would be entirely beyond our control, and therefore they would not call for penitence, but only for the employment of proper methods of psycho-therapy. On the other hand it is often, and probably as a rule, the case that such conditions are due in part at least to our own fault. In such cases there is need for penance as well as for psycho-therapy, while even where sins of one particular kind were due to some morbid condition the sufferer would still need penitence for other sins, not due to that condition, however adequately he might have been cured of his particular complex by suitable methods. For instance, a patient who had been cured of the drug habit by psycho-analysis

would not thereby have obtained forgiveness for his lapses into the habit in so far as they were in part due to his own consent and not entirely due to morbid conditions over which he had no control; still less would he have obtained forgiveness for his sins against charity or humility, which, as we have seen, may be as bad as any others. Further, it may be observed that frequently the use of the Sacrament of Penance by itself is not sufficient to enable the penitent to overcome temptations arising from some definitely morbid psychological condition; it may be desirable for him to undergo some course of treatment for the cure of such a condition, although the sins to which it has led him have been forgiven in virtue of his penitence.

These considerations lend importance to the retention of the actual performance by the penitent of some definite act of penance as part of the whole sacramental process by which the penitent receives absolution. It has been seen that in the primitive practice the performance of a very heavy penance, often continued for years, was almost the most prominent feature of the rite, such penances being inflicted only for the gravest sins, which it was regarded as almost unthinkable that a Christian should commit. The imposition of penances of this type has to a certain extent been found necessary in modern times among recent converts from heathenism. But in civilised countries as a general rule the penance inflicted is of the most trifling kind, the

saying of a collect or a psalm or some other well-known form of prayer. The justification of the slight and almost trivial character of such penances lies in the fact that in most cases the humiliation of confessing serious sins is of itself a heavy penance and a sufficient proof of contrition. Further, the attempt to impose a penance adequate to the sin committed rests in the last resort on the quite untenable supposition that any act of reparation can atone for the injury inflicted on the majesty of God by a single serious sin. The primitive type of penance may have had its value in preserving the moral standard of the Church against the danger of lapsing into acquiescence in the vices of the heathen world; its heaviest penances were inadequate as a method of offering reparation of an adequate kind as an atonement for serious sins. But the retention of the definite performance of some kind of penance is of the greatest value as a definite act, by which the penitent expresses his recognition of the fact that the sins which he has confessed are actions for which he was morally responsible, and not merely the results of temperamental weaknesses which he had no power to control. By the offering of some act of satisfaction, however small, he acknowledges his own guilt and thus marks the difference between the sacramental rite by which the Church forgives sin and the treatment by which a specialist in the healing of mental and moral diseases may hope to cure his patients.

(*Note I.*—It is not, of course, intended to minimise in any way the great benefits which recent psychological research has conferred on mankind by its discovery of means for curing the morbid conditions referred to. My purpose is only to point out that they are essentially different from the forgiveness of sins by the Church. There is some danger that such methods of healing may be regarded as a substitute for the Sacrament of Penance, owing to the common error that only a few of the more obvious forms of vice are really sins, and that sins of pride, uncharitableness, and the like are not really sins or only very trifling matters. This is of course a complete perversion of the teaching of the Gospel. On the other hand, there is also a danger at the present moment that priests with no adequate technical knowledge may suppose that it is their duty to dabble in psycho-analysis as part of their ministerial duty. It might no doubt be a very good thing for a priest to have an expert knowledge of psycho-therapy, but it is impossible for the majority of them to possess it. Unless they are really qualified to deal with such matters it is very dangerous for them to attempt a task which falls outside their province; it is obviously their duty to refer cases needing special treatment to those who are qualified to give it.)

(*Note II.*—In certain cases it is necessary for the penitent not only to make some act of satisfaction to God for the injury done to Him by his sin, but also to man. Clearly, it is impossible for penitence to be

genuine if we are unwilling to atone for injuries to our neighbour, assuming that it is in our power to do so. For instance a thief could hardly claim that his penitence was genuine if he retained his ill-gotten gains. He is not indeed bound to confess his crime to the victim of it in cases where this might involve him in punishment by the state for his wrong-doing, but he is bound to restore what he has stolen. The various circumstances, which are held by theologians to oblige a penitent to make restitution or excuse him from doing so, do not fall within the scope of this book; they can only be dealt with in a technical treatise on moral theology. Any sincere penitent will recognise that if he has wronged his neighbour in a serious matter and is in a position to make amends for that injury, he is bound to do so. He cannot hope to be restored to the love of God if he refuses to manifest the love due to his neighbour. "He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how shall he love God whom he hath not seen?")

X. THE METHOD OF CONFESSION

IT is normally advisable for anyone who wishes to make a start in the use of the Sacrament of Penance to consult some priest with experience in hearing Confessions as to the best method of preparation. Normally, indeed, such instruction should be given to the young at latest during their preparation for Confirmation and first Communion. In the present conditions of the Church of England however it is common to find that the need for the Sacrament is only felt by those who have reached a later age, perhaps after they have been regular communicants for some years. This is due to the fact that they have never been instructed as to the possibility and desirability of the practice, or that any instruction they have received has been too vague and tentative to make them realise its value. Of course in some cases they may have received full and explicit instruction, but rejected it at the time. Consequently it may be of assistance to some readers if the more practical side of the matter is dealt with here.

The first requisite for making a good Confession is sorrow for sin and the desire for amendment of life. Without these no Confession can be valid in the sight of God; it would be a mere sacrilege. On the other hand, it is not necessary that the penitent

should feel confident that his purpose of amendment will prevent him from relapsing into his past sins; if this were required Confession would not be possible till the moment of death. The Sacrament of Penance is not merely a means for obtaining forgiveness in the juristic sense; it is, as has been shown above, a means for obtaining that full reconciliation with God which is only complete when all our sins are finally overcome, and it is therefore a means to help us in overcoming them. Although deliberately sacrilegious Confessions are hardly likely to occur in the present conditions of English religion, in which it is more or less open to the individual to decide whether he will go to Confession or not, it cannot be said that there is no danger of them. In parishes where the full Catholic faith has been taught for years it is possible for a generation to grow up which regards the use of the Sacrament as a matter of course. In such cases individuals may be found who go to Confession because it is the natural and usual thing to do so, but conceal sins of which they feel particularly ashamed. Such confessions are clearly fresh sins in themselves; it is, however, impossible to avoid the danger that they may occur in certain cases except by insistence on the message of the Gospel. This is the only remedy against the universal danger of substituting conventional church-going for Christianity. Neither Catholicism nor Protestantism is immune from the danger that individuals or even congregations may lapse from

the latter into the former; and sacrilegious Confessions, in which particular sins are not confessed—or confessed without serious purpose of amendment—is merely an instance of the danger as it affects Catholics.

The next requisite is careful self-examination. This is, of course, necessary before all Confessions; but it must clearly take a considerable amount of time and trouble in the case of a grown-up person making his or her Confession for the first time. For the purpose of self-examination it is often convenient in such cases for the penitent to divide his life into three parts, the first being that of childhood, up to the age of about twelve, the second that of adolescence, up to about the age of twenty-one, the last the rest of his life. In the case of those who are rather younger the third period might consist of the last two or three years. In regard to the first, there may be little or nothing to remember; there may, however, be a few incidents where the penitent can remember quite clearly doing something which he recognised as being definitely sinful, and not merely “naughty” in the sense that they were forbidden by a parent or a nurse. In the second period there will normally be more; in particular, there will often be the first beginnings of the formation of sinful habits which have persisted into later life. The last period, again, will normally include the largest number of sins, and also the most serious, since they will as a rule have been committed with a clearer understanding of

their inherent wickedness and a greater strength to resist them. There may, of course, be exceptions to this rule, but it will be generally true. It should be added that while reasonable care should be taken to remember the sins of the earlier part of the penitent's life, he should not worry himself unduly with an over-scrupulous attempt to remember the details of petty sins.

As far as possible the penitent should, in confessing his sins, state how many times he has fallen into any particular sin. This, of course, will often be impossible; in a first Confession it will, perhaps, very rarely be possible. But he should indicate how far any particular sin is one of which he has been guilty frequently and habitually, or how far it is one into which he has only fallen on a few particular occasions; or, again, if he has in the past been guilty of habitual sins which he has now overcome he should make clear both the fact that the sin was more or less a habit once, but that the temptation to yield in this way has been, at any rate for the present, overcome. In the generally accepted tradition of moral theology this is held only to apply strictly to mortal sins. It has been observed above that this whole conception involves very grave difficulties; but in this particular matter it is more than usually misleading. A penitent may be doing the gravest harm both to his own soul and to his neighbour by sins against the virtue of charity, which in themselves are all of them of a rather trifling kind, but in the aggregate are very harmful.

It is always well to make it clear whether in our Confessions the sins we mention have been frequent and more or less habitual, or only isolated lapses, although it will frequently be impossible to mention the precise number of occasions on which we have fallen into them, except in the cases of definite acts of sin of a more or less obvious character. For instance, it will normally be easier to remember the number of times we have spoken under the influence of anger than the number of times we have been guilty of angry and uncharitable thoughts. In general, it is clear that in confessing our sins we are bound to make it clear whether we are confessing a large or a small number of sins of a similar character, even though it is normally impossible to remember the precise number of occasions on which we have sinned in a particular way, unless we are making regular and fairly frequent use of the Sacrament of Penance.

Although it is hardly possible to suppose that a penitent preparing sincerely for a first Confession will be unable to remember his sins, yet it is frequently and normally found of considerable assistance to use in preparation one or other of the forms of self-examination provided in various books of devotion. Such forms are of value, since it often happens that the penitent is particularly conscious of some habitual sin and is brought to the use of the Sacrament by his desire to overcome it. It is of course quite natural that he should come with this motive; but it is often hard for him to recognise his

good counter for those who are from

other sins owing to his pre-occupation with one in particular. In such cases the use of a form will help him to realise the fact that although he may not be so acutely conscious of his other sins, yet he has in fact been guilty of many. Further, in the event of his overcoming successfully this particular temptation, he will be able to realise that he has still a long distance to go before he can hope to attain to the ideal of Christian perfection. Unless he does so, he may gain comparatively little advantage from the use of the Sacrament; he will have overcome one particular sin which troubled his conscience, but there may be others which have never troubled him but are quite as serious in the sight of God. The use of a form of self-examination is of some assistance to those who are in this state and also to those who find it hard to express themselves without such assistance. On the other hand, it often happens that such forms by their undue length and minuteness of detail confuse the penitent and tend to produce an over-scrupulous state of conscience. This over-elaboration is in part due to the attempt to provide for persons in almost every conceivable state of life in one form. Such forms are usually valuable in proportion to their brevity and simplicity.

In most books of devotion forms of Confession are provided, the use of which is not in any way an obligation. It is, indeed, an act of charity and courtesy if, before the greater festivals of the Church when there are a number of penitents waiting, penitents repeat them privately before making

their actual Confession and so save the time of the priest and of other penitents. They should, however, state how long ago their last Confession was and also whether they performed the penance set them. In the case of a first Confession this point does not arise. Further except in cases of urgency it is always desirable for a penitent to make a special appointment for the hearing of a first Confession, since such Confessions are naturally bound to take longer than others, and it is obviously more courteous to other penitents not to make it necessary for them to wait for a longer time than they would naturally expect. Any priest will be willing to make such an appointment. The same consideration applies, to a certain extent, to the case of those who have abandoned the use of the Sacrament of Penance for a prolonged period and wish to return to it.

No one who wishes to make use of the Sacrament of Penance is bound to make his Confession to any particular priest. As a rule it seems that in England penitents prefer to make their Confessions to a priest who is personally known to them, but it is by no means unusual to find the opposite. Normally a penitent should make his Confessions regularly to the same priest, but he is not bound to do so. In any case, he should not allow himself to become so completely accustomed to one priest as to find it impossible to make his Confession to another if for any reason he is unable to make his Confession to the priest to whom he is accustomed. In the Church of England, where there are large numbers of

people who have only made their first Confession late in life and where there is no universal tradition of the use of the Sacrament of Penance, it is distressingly common to find people who have abandoned the use of the Sacrament on the death of their ordinary confessor or his removal to another part of the country. It is, for this reason, an advantage if in Catholic parishes the young are encouraged occasionally to make their Confessions to some other priest than their usual confessor, in order that they may not be tempted to fall away from the practice in the event of his death or departure.

In conclusion a few words may be said on the subject of the "seal of Confession." A priest is entirely forbidden to reveal to any third person anything which he has learnt from the Confession of a penitent. In some difficult problem he may consult some other priest for help in dealing with a particular problem, but in doing so he is bound to choose for his adviser a priest who cannot conceivably guess at the identity of the penitent in whose case the difficulty has arisen. The rule of secrecy is absolute, and no conceivable circumstances—not even, for instance, the revelation of a plot against the safety of the state—will justify a priest in violating his duty of silence. Further, he is bound not to show by any alteration of his manner towards a penitent his knowledge of sins he has confessed. Nor may he raise in private conversation with his penitent any matter only known to him through the

penitent's Confession, except where the penitent of his own free will desires to discuss such matters for the sake of obtaining further guidance. The sort of case which might arise would be that of a young man at the University who might wish to consult his confessor as to a sense of a possible vocation to the ministry. It should, further, be noted that priests are bound to exercise the utmost discretion to prevent any accidental revelation of some fact known to them through the Confession of a penitent and thus guarantee the secrecy of all they may have heard against any risk of disclosure, however remote. In practice it is only necessary to compare the ease with which official secrets or confidential communications of various kinds are allowed to leak out, to the complete safety with which priests, who may be dangerously indiscreet in ordinary matters, preserve the seal of Confession, in order to realise its absolute inviolability.

(*Note.*—It is not, of course, intended to imply that indiscretion in ordinary matters may not be a serious fault in the character of a priest.)

XI. ABSOLUTION

WHEN the penitent has finished his Confession it may be necessary for the priest to satisfy himself by a few questions that he has understood what the penitent has said. This is fairly commonly the case in a first Confession when it is easy for the penitent through inexperience to fail to make himself clear. The only object of such questions is to enable the priest to make sure that he has not misunderstood anything. In the case of regular penitents the necessity should not generally arise. He may then give such advice as he thinks desirable in order to assist the penitent in overcoming his temptations or growing in Christian holiness. In practice it may be questioned whether Anglican confessors are not inclined in many cases to over-emphasise the value of such counsel and the extent to which a penitent can profit by it; but this is a matter which depends very largely on the temperament and disposition of the penitent. In particular, one who is in the habit of making his Confession with some frequency should, as a rule, need less advice than one who makes it comparatively rarely. After giving such advice as he may think desirable the priest sets a penance to be performed and absolves the penitent. Although there is in the Church of England a certain amount of variation in the

prayers which accompany the giving of absolution, the central portion always consists of the words provided in the service for the visitation of the sick. "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." The last clause is, of course, the form of absolution of the Western Church and the only necessary form of words in the whole Sacrament of Penance.

There has, as is well known, been in the past an incredible amount of controversy as to the position of the priest in regard to the giving of absolution. On the one hand, he has been represented as the divinely accredited minister of the Church, who has full power either to forgive or to refuse forgiveness. On the other side, he has been represented as commissioned merely to pronounce the fact that, if the sinner has been sincere in his repentance and confession, he has in fact been forgiven. The former view has in general been associated with a high estimate of the value of the Sacrament of Penance, while the latter view is that of the Protestant bodies which, while not absolutely denying the legitimacy of the Sacrament, yet in practice eliminate it almost entirely or confine its use to very exceptional cases, as for example the case of those who seek to return to religion after a whole life of grave iniquity.

The controversy is, like most of the controversies of the Reformation, not really a controversy as to matters of doctrine. The two points of view are in the last resort rationalisations of two different views as to the value in practice of the Sacrament of Penance. Catholic theology emphasises the value of the divine gift of forgiveness received in the Sacrament of Penance. And although language may be found which suggests that the priest has such absolute authority that his giving or refusing of absolution carries with it the giving or refusing of pardon in heaven, yet Catholic theology has never held this view. A man may receive absolution on earth; but if he obtains it either by a false confession, in which sins are concealed, or by a false display of penitence when he has no real sorrow for sin or purpose of amendment, his absolution is not valid; it is sometimes said that it is not ratified in heaven. Protestant theology has tended to minimise the importance of the part played by the priest because it has on the whole tended not to value the Sacrament itself. Although its use was recognised by the great leaders of the Reformation, it has fallen into desuetude in the Protestant bodies as a whole. The controversy, although it has largely turned round the precise nature of the part played by the priest, has really been concerned with the desirability of the practice; the controversy has been further complicated by the real or alleged abuses of the practice at the time of the Reformation and subsequently.

The desirability or otherwise of the practice of sacramental Confession however depends on the considerations brought forward in the preceding chapters. It has proved its value in the experience of countless generations of Christians, and no amount of argument as to the precise nature of the absolution given by the priest can disprove this. The value of the Sacrament of Penance as a whole lies in the fact that it enables the penitent to express his sorrow for his sins by a formal outward action, and thereby to satisfy himself that he has repented with a sufficient degree of sincerity to justify himself in believing that his penitence is acceptable to God. In return for this he receives the gift of forgiveness. The value of the fact that this gift is conferred in the outward form of absolution is that it expresses the truth that forgiveness is not a right to which the penitent can lay any claim, merely on the ground of his penitence, but a divine gift to which he has no right whatsoever. He has, by his sins, forfeited all claim to reconciliation with the love of God; the gift of absolution comes to him from the merits of the Precious Blood, and not through any merits of his own repentance. It is true that the gift of pardon is freely bestowed on all who repent; but this does not lessen the fact that in every case the pardon so given is a free gift of the love of God, not the automatic result of penitence. As we have seen, the effect of absolution is to restore the penitent to the love of God; the extent of that restoration depends indeed to some extent on the

sincerity and depth of his repentance, because his capacity to receive the divine gift is conditioned by the extent to which his soul is opened to it by penitence. But the forgiveness which enters the soul that is open to receive it is always a free gift of divine love, not an automatic or inevitable result. In receiving absolution the penitent is assured of the fact that he has received that gift of forgiveness to an extent which justifies him in regarding his past sins as obliterated. He must always remain a penitent; but he can forget the details of his own sins and go forward in the paths of Christian holiness. He must recognise his own unworthiness of the love of God, which has enabled him to repent and return to grace; but he need not brood over his past lapses or seek for their specific forgiveness. The words of absolution have bestowed on him for his particular sins that pardon which was won for all mankind once and for all by the death of Jesus on the Cross.

This is the real value of the giving of absolution : the exact method by which the divine gift is mediated through the priest as the minister of Christ is not really a profitable matter for discussion. He is not to be regarded as merely a passive medium, since it is within his power to refuse absolution; on the other hand, he can only do so if he is morally convinced that the penitent is not sincere in his Confession. It is only in the rarest cases that such certainty is attainable. He has, further, the duty of imposing penance; and though,

as has been seen, this part of the Sacrament is in Western Christendom as a rule more or less of a formality, it cannot be assumed that it will always remain so. It is, for instance, imaginable that there might be a general decline in the ordinary standards of social morality which would make it necessary for the Church to vindicate her own standards as against those of the world, and to impose severe penances on those who lapsed from the standard of Christianity into those of ordinary society. This possibility may be remote, but the experience of the primitive Church and present problems in the mission-field suggest that it is only where the moral standards of society have been to a large extent leavened by those of the Church that the old type of canonical penance can necessarily be regarded as obsolete. Where it prevails, the priest, subject to the jurisdiction of the bishop, has a large measure of judicial authority to exercise in the Name of Our Lord and on behalf of His Church. Further, it is his duty to give counsel and advice to the penitent as may be needed; and although this part of his duty is not essential to the Sacrament it adds to that element of personal responsibility which rests upon the priest in regard to the Sacrament. At the same time, he is only the agent of Christ appointed by the Church to exercise the ministry of forgiveness in His Name; he is the medium of a divine gift, not the bestower of it. That gift is only made possible by the contrition of the penitent; but it is a gift which infinitely exceeds the merits of his contrition.

If the priest should withhold it because he wrongly believed that the penitent was not sincere in his sorrow, or if he should give it to one who had no sincere penitence, his action would be null and void in the sight of God; in the one case, the un-absolved penitent would be forgiven in heaven; in the other case, he would not be forgiven. The promise "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" is absolute, in the sense that it gives the Church the power to judge and absolve the penitent or to refuse absolution to the impenitent; but it does not inevitably give the individual minister of the Church such an infallible power to read the minds of men as to put him beyond all danger of being deceived.

XII. THE PRACTICE OF CONFESSION

THE general rule of the Roman and Eastern Churches is that all Christians are bound to make use of the Sacrament of Penance at least once a year, at Easter. Obviously in practice the Church of England has not imposed on her members any binding rule as to the use of the Sacrament. It cannot be held that communicants of the Church of England are subject to any rule in the matter, since the Reformation settlement quite clearly left the matter to the private conscience of the individual. On the other hand it quite clearly recognised the validity and legitimacy of the use of the Sacrament of Penance, and in practice it has been widely used by Anglicans—except for the period of lethargy in the whole religious life of England, which is roughly marked by the century during which the four Georges were on the throne. There is no conceivable justification for the position of those who deny its legitimacy within the Church of England, or for the action of those priests who refuse to hear the Confessions of penitents when asked to do so. Such a refusal may, indeed, not be unreasonable if it is perfectly easy for the penitent to find a priest whose training and experience make it easier for him to act as the minister of the Sacrament. But it is

not likely that penitents would ask a convinced and definite Evangelical who disapproved of the practice to act in this capacity where they had the opportunity of access to an experienced Catholic. But it is by no means uncommon to hear of cases in which Anglo-Catholics residing in heathen lands have asked priests of the Church of England to hear their Confession and have been met with a definite refusal. Such refusals are a grave violation of the duties of the priesthood and should be reported to the bishop.

While, however, it is clear that members of the Church of England are not under any obligation to make use of the Sacrament, it may well be urged that those of them who in other matters accept the general tradition of Catholic devotion and practice have no justification for neglecting this particular part of it. The fact that in itself it is a difficult and naturally unpleasant thing for a man to confess his sins to another is no justification for neglecting an integral part of the system of the Catholic life, while enjoying those parts of it which are, at least to many people, naturally attractive. The Catholic religion is not the same thing as a movement in favour of brighter services. Some years ago it was not uncommon to find a fairly large number of Anglicans who habitually attended the services of Anglo-Catholic churches, but did not regard themselves as in any way bound to use the Sacrament of Penance. This tendency is, however, less noticeable

at the present time; it is, indeed, becoming not uncommon to find Anglicans who make regular use of the Sacrament of Penance, but are quite indifferent to the question of whether the church at which they worship makes any use of the external accessories of Catholic devotion or not.

For those who accept the Catholic tradition in regard to the practice of Confession it is natural to accept the rule of the Eastern and Western Church that Confession at least once a year is a binding obligation. But it is hardly possible that those who seriously desire to make real progress in the Christian life will be content to accept this bare minimum of obligation as being necessarily sufficient as the standard of their ordinary practice. It is true that there is a very wide variation of temperament among Christians and that some will find that a frequent use of the Sacrament is of greater spiritual value to them than others will. But the precept of annual Confession, like that of annual Communion, is intended as an absolute minimum, and there are very few who will not find that it is of the greatest spiritual value to them to make their Confession more frequently than this. There are, however, two rather distinct tendencies in Catholic practice, one of which is inclined to recommend very frequent use of the Sacrament, the other a decidedly less frequent use. The latter of these, which is rather strongly represented among Anglicans of the older Tractarian type and to a considerable extent by the old-fashioned type of

Roman Catholic devotion which prevailed in England before the Tractarian period, tends as a general rule to advise the practice of Confession three times a year. The other represents the modern development of the devotional tradition of the Counter-Reformation and recommends a much more frequent use of the Sacrament, making weekly Confession a general standard for those whose time and position in the world enables them to lead a life of considerable devotion, and urging those whose position does not allow this to approximate to it as nearly as circumstances allow.

In the Roman Church the latter tradition is at the present time the prevalent one, and it is widely advocated by that element of Anglo-Catholicism which inclines in general towards the Roman type of devotion. On the other hand, it is recognised that the individual has a very wide measure of personal liberty; the only limitation is that according to the general Roman theology he is bound to make his Confession before receiving Holy Communion if he is in a state of mortal sin—that is, if he has committed a mortal sin since his last Confession. Here, however, there arises the difficulty indicated above as to the whole distinction between mortal and venial sin. It is largely owing to the feeling that it is right and necessary that one who has fallen into obvious and scandalous sin should make his Confession before receiving Holy Communion that the distinction between these two classes of sin has been elaborated, and it is very doubtful whether it can be

justified as a point of theology. None the less, it remains true that those who are trying to be Christians and yet are still engaged in a struggle to overcome the more obvious sins of the flesh ought to make their Confession with a very considerable frequency, and that in the case of the more scandalous sins of this type they should make their Confession before receiving Holy Communion if they have fallen into them since their last Confession. This course is not only suggested by natural considerations of reverence for the Blessed Sacrament, but also by the proved efficacy of the practice as a means for enabling the penitent to overcome temptations of this kind. Apart from these cases there may be others who feel that some particular sin they have committed was of exceptional gravity and such as to call for immediate Confession. Too often, indeed, such people are tempted to avoid or postpone going to their Confessions and their Communion for a considerable period, owing to the natural dislike of repentance; but, clearly, it is essential that those who have fallen into any kind of sin which they regard as unusually serious, however much they may be tempted to postpone repentance, should be encouraged to repent immediately, and should not proceed with their life as communicants without some special recognition of the gravity of their sin.

Except however in the case of those who have fallen into some sin of this kind the individual has complete liberty to decide for himself as to the

frequency with which he will use the Sacrament, subject to the rule of Easter Confession. A common practice is to use the Sacrament three times a year. This practice is rendered of a somewhat doubtful value in that it has come to be associated in practice with the three great festivals of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost; it is thus possible to find penitents making their Confession three times in one half of the year and not at all in the other half. There is, however, no reason to suppose that during the latter half of the year they are immune from temptation. It would seem desirable either that the third should be dissociated from Pentecost and deferred to some point half-way between Easter and Christmas, or preferably that a fourth Confession should be inserted during the latter half of the year before some festival, which should not be allowed to pass without the use of the Sacrament. Such a rule certainly suits many people, especially those who lead a fairly busy life and are not subject to the more obvious kinds of temptation. There are, however, others who find that weekly Confession is of the utmost value as a means to the leading of a devout life; and the practice also seems to harmonise well with the type of religion which relies very largely on frequent Communion as one of its main inspirations. This type of religion is particularly suited to those who live in the conditions of the type familiar in the poorer quarters of modern towns, where opportunities for prayer are hard to come by, and who by temperament and

circumstances are not likely to be capable of spending very much time in prayer. In general, however, it is probable that the average young man or woman of the more educated class will find so frequent a use of the Sacrament too much, while three or four Confessions in the course of a year will scarcely be adequate; for such persons Confession about once a month or six weeks is, in the majority of cases, a suitable and practicable rule, and one which is followed in practice by a very large number of penitents. But it must be borne in mind that there is no binding rule in such matters; the penitent will be well-advised to find a confessor on whom he can rely, and to follow his advice in the matter.

I trust I shall not be regarded as guilty of impertinence if I venture to suggest to Anglo-Catholics that the use of frequent Confession is not "extreme," and also that the following of the more old-fashioned practice is not necessarily a sign of lack of devotion. It is inevitable that frequency of Confession should vary very considerably in accordance with the temperament, circumstances, and upbringing of the penitent.

XIII. SOME OBJECTIONS TO THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

IT is, perhaps, desirable to consider a few of the popular objections frequently alleged against the Sacrament of Penance, although these objections are much less common now than they were some twenty years ago. The causes of this decline are in part due to the fact that modern psychological research has tended to show the value of the practice of Confession in certain cases; in part they are due to the better understanding of the Catholic position in the Church of England in general. Many of those who would describe themselves as Liberal Evangelicals would admit the desirability of the practice, at least in certain cases. None the less, the objections are still heard fairly commonly, and may be briefly considered.

(1) It is a "Roman Catholic" practice. This is, of course, a pure appeal to prejudice. The formularies of the Church of England recognise the legitimacy of Confession; it is recommended at the hour of death and before Communion to those who cannot quiet their consciences otherwise. The view that it is a good thing to have a conscience which can be easily quieted seems strange in the disciples of One who said "I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

(2) It allows the priest to come between the soul and God. This objection has been dealt with above, p. 54.

(3) That it gives the priesthood an undue influence over the minds of the laity. Here there is some superficial justification, in the sense that, given a rather ill-trained or unscrupulous clergy, and rather ignorant and superstitious laity, it will always be possible for the clergy to influence them unduly in matters which fall outside the proper scope of the ministry, such as politics. If they attempt to do so, it is always possible that they will use the Confessional as one means of accomplishing their object. But clericalism of this type is by no means a monopoly of Catholicism. It is very doubtful whether the Catholic priesthood have ever exercised such a domination over their flocks as has sometimes been exercised through the pulpit in Protestant countries. Yet this is hardly a valid reason for abolishing sermons. The fact is that clericalism is an evil which can only be avoided entirely if the clergy on the one hand are trained to see that it is their duty to guide the flock committed to their charge towards the attainment of Christian holiness, not to dictate to them a whole view of life in matters which fall outside the Gospel, and on the other hand the laity are sufficiently educated to be able to reject any teaching which they may be given in church which goes outside the proper sphere of Christianity. Where these conditions are not fulfilled there is always a danger of clericalism in the bad sense of the word;

but the Confessional is by no means the main weapon of clericalism. It is indeed singularly ill-adapted for the purpose, for the penitent is under no obligation to consult the priest as to his views on politics or any similar subject, and the priest has no right to inquire as to them. In the circumstances of the Reformation, indeed, when sympathy with the views of the Reformers might be regarded as sympathy with the sin of heresy, it may have been possible to use the Confessional in this way; but there is no evidence that any attempts which may have been made were particularly successful. In general, the pulpit and the formation of organisations under clerical control are the favourite weapons of clericalism, whether Catholic or Protestant.

(4) That it tends to weaken the character of the penitent, by encouraging him to rely on the use of the Sacrament rather than on his own moral efforts. Once again it is a little difficult to take this argument seriously; it obviously emanates from those who have little or no experience in the matter. One of the main purposes of the Sacrament of Penance is to build up the character of the penitent by enabling him to gain grace to withstand temptation, more especially in those cases where the penitent is exposed to habitual temptations of the more obvious kind. In practice, the Sacrament is normally found to be of the utmost value in assisting the penitent in accomplishing this task. In the case of those who are not exposed to such temptations it is perhaps more

valuable as a means of bringing home to the penitent the fact that sins which otherwise might be disregarded by the world are sins in the sight of God which it is the penitent's duty to eradicate from his character. In forcing him to recognise this and to overcome them it is still strengthening him in the attainment of Christian holiness. It is, of course, possible that the general worldly estimate of a strong character is different from the Christian ideal; but, if so, any means which tend to produce the Christian character in the soul will be regarded by the world as weakening it. It is true that the Sacrament of Penance cannot by itself produce the complete Christian character, and it is also true that in the religious development of the past century it has to some extent been over-emphasised for the simple reason that it is a controversial matter, and in an age of controversy the central points at issue inevitably receive an exaggerated amount of attention. But its value as a means for building up the Christian character are a matter of experience which is so well-attested that the objection can only emanate from those who are unacquainted with its practical results.

CONCLUSION

THERE is always a danger in an age of controversy that any point which is particularly controversial may be regarded as the whole or, at least, as the most important part of the system to which it belongs. This has to some extent been the case in regard to the Sacrament of Penance. Catholics have tended to speak and write as though the use of Confession were the distinctive mark of the Catholic religion. There could be no greater error. The value of the Sacrament of Penance cannot be over-estimated; but its value lies in its efficacy as a means of securing penitence and the forgiveness which penitence brings. But penitence is not the whole of the Christian character. It is, or should be, the foundation on which the whole character of Christian holiness is built up. The use of the Sacrament of Penance without the love of the Blessed Sacrament and the Mass, and without the Catholic life of prayer, would be merely a fragment of Catholic devotion. This book is written largely in the hope that it may be of some assistance to those who are seeking to find their way to the Catholic life; the Sacrament of Penance is one of the means towards its attainment, but it is very far from being the whole of it.

For Mary Magdalene the casting out of the seven devils by Jesus was the necessary preliminary before she could hope to follow Him; but it was only the beginning of her life of service.