

THE CONFESSIONAL

A REMARKABLE ARTICLE

The following remarkable article, entitled 'The Confessional,' by the Rev. J. Kennedy Elliott, Presbyterian minister of Wellington, appeared in the September issue of *The Christian Irishman*, a Dublin Protestant publication:—

'It has often occurred to me that amid the many deadly errors of Romanism there must be some lurking and latent truth. Were it not so it would be difficult to comprehend how heresies that are to Protestants gross and palpable are acceptable to many educated minds. Some examples illustrative of my meaning will no doubt readily suggest themselves to the reader.

But it is of the custom of Confession that I have been thinking much of late, and this is the subject I wish to bring under special notice in this short article. I feel persuaded that there must be in this practice some elements of truth and because of which the custom has been endured for centuries. Protestants, like Roman Catholics, believe in Confession; aye, we believe even in confession to a priest, but with us the priest is the Lord Jesus Christ, the only and all-sufficient Advocate with that God with Whom we have to do. What, however, concerns us at present is to ascertain if confession to a human being, under proper Scriptural safeguards, may not be permissible and have some advantages. I hope I may be pardoned if I here become a little autobiographical. Now that I have passed into the ranks of the older ministers, I have pastoral experiences that never came to me when I was younger. People seem disposed to give me their confidences, and the recurrence of cases of this kind has led me to the conclusion that such voluntary disclosures may be a relief to burdened consciences. Perhaps I may be permitted to select two typical cases that in their concrete form may illustrate what has been in my mind.

Not long since an aged and saintly man who publicly had led an unblemished life lay on his death-bed, but, as he neared eternity, the memory of the secret sins of his youth distressed him, and it was a positive relief to him to tell me with abhorrence and penitence of the sinful past. There was also another experience I had to which I call special attention. Briefly put, the facts are these: The writer lives in a New Zealand manse, 14,000 miles away from the beautiful Emerald Isle. One morning a woman of the degraded class came to me and stated that she wished to tell me as her most trusted friend some of the secrets and shame and sorrows of her life. I told her that it was not the custom of the Presbyterian Church to countenance anything that looked like auricular confession. She replied that she was aware of this and approved of it, but that her condition was desperate, and she feared she would go mad. To this I said that it was, of course, my duty in such circumstances to give her all the counsel and comfort in my power, that I hoped she fully understood I was not extorting from her the information she seemed anxious to give, that indeed I would rather not receive it, but that with this explanation I was prepared to give her a patient hearing. She then went into the details of her story, and shameful and sorrowful they were. The recital gave me a kind of moral nausea, and awakened in my heart commiseration for men who are continually going through such experiences. A further unpleasant effect was that as the names of parties were mentioned with whom I often come into contact, I only now can meet them with feelings too painful to be easily described.

I think we may concede that occasionally benefit may be received by a penitent consulting an aged and sympathetic pastor, but there are certain risks and restrictions which I wish to point out in a few closing sentences.

'When we make a fellow-creature our confidant, and tell him what we have done in secret against the Most High, we are liable to be loathed and despised. We need fear no such result when we approach the feet of the Divine and compassionate Saviour, Who has

not only perfect knowledge but perfect love, Who knows all our ways, and yet does not spurn us from His throne, but delights to heal and bless. It may seem a humble and correct thing to submit ourselves to the direction of some "father" confessor under the seal of secrecy, but this is not the highest or most desirable state. It is pleasant, no doubt, to teach your young child to walk, and to guide his tottering steps, but every parent greatly prefers to see his son walk along, alone and with manly stride. Romanism follows the former course, Protestantism aims at the latter.

'One of the concomitants of the Confessional is that the spiritual director assigns penance. This is just another possession in which there is a grain of truth. There must, of course, be discipline for the evils we have done, but it is exercised by our Heavenly Father whose chastisements are exactly adjusted to our failings. We may be certain that He never delegated or arranged that the correction should primarily be inflicted by one of His children on the other members of His family. No earthly parent would divest himself of this prerogative and depute one of his sons to administer correction, and that as he pleased, to brothers and sisters.

'Associated with the hearing of confession is the pronouncing of absolution. I would respectfully venture to affirm that great care must be exercised to impress upon the mind of the penitent that all such absolution is only declaratory and precatory. In such a case the penitent might receive much benefit. Perhaps the Protestant minister has not so far as this office is concerned sufficiently magnified his office, and in support of this view I would crave indulgence to draw again from the *repertoire* supplied by my latter day experiences. I remember visiting in his last illness a venerable and genuine Christian. He was a man whom we often employed to conduct religious services. He always preached with power and unction, and was greatly blessed, and had many converts. As is not uncommon, he was in the closing scene overwhelmed with a horror of darkness, and in terrible doubt about his own personal acceptance and salvation. I tried fruitlessly every expedient to bring him comfort. I quoted Scripture and plied him with the evangelical truths which he had so effectually proclaimed, and which were so precious to him. At last, with great solemnity, I uttered words like these: "Now as the accredited minister and ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ, and since you avow that you renounce every other hope, and depend only for eternal salvation on the finished work of the adorable and only Saviour, I declare unto you that in virtue of this faith you have remission of sins, for he that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life." This authoritative message, spoken with the accent of conviction, seemed to be the very thing needed. Peace flowed into the darkened soul, and from this until my friend departed he was no further tormented with doubt.

'I hope that in the previous paragraphs I have not by concession given away too much. I am convinced that it is proper, prudent, and politic to be as conciliatory as possible. If, then, I am correct in supposing that our Roman Catholic countrymen have much that is at least plausible for their beliefs and practices, the lesson that is to be learned is that we are to be kind and tolerant towards them. Again I must resort to what is biographical. I am not ashamed to testify that some whom I esteem and love belong to the Romish communion. One of these was the Rector of a Romish College, who never omitted an opportunity of honoring me and doing me a kindness. Another was the Governor of one of our Colonial jails, who also loaded me with many benefits, and insisted on my being with him for hours on the last night he spent on earth. Another is a medical gentleman, now on a furlough like myself, and he interrupted his holiday engagements and came from London to Belfast with the sole object of seeing me.

'I know the evils of Monasticism, and I am opposed to the Conventual system, but candour compels me to admit that I have received great and unexpected kindness from the Lady Superioress and Sisters of a