

ENTIRE ABSOLUTION OF THE PENITENT.

A SERMON,

MOSTLY PREACHED

BEFORE THE UNIVERSITY,

IN THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF CHRIST, IN OXFORD,

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BY THE

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P R E F A C E.

THE writer of the present Sermon has already stated, in the course of it, what was not, as well as what was, his object ; yet it may possibly save some misunderstanding, here to restate it. Its object is, the relief of individual penitents. Consciences *are* burdened. There is a provision, on the part of God, in His Church, to relieve them. They wish to be, and to know that they are, in a state of grace. God has provided a means, however deeply any have fallen, to replace them in it. They feel that they cannot take off their own burden, loose the chains of their past sins, and set themselves free to serve God. They look for some act out of themselves, if there be one, which shall do this. God has provided it. They want something to sever between past and future, that they may begin anew. By His absolving sentence, God does efface the past. They cannot estimate their own repentance and faith. He has provided Physicians of the soul, to relieve and judge for those who "open their griefs" to them. They wish to know how to overcome besetting temptations ; God has provided those, experienced in the sad history of man's sins and sorrows, who can tell them how others, through the grace of God, have overcome them.

Such are the cases to which the Church of which we are members, most directly applies the remedy of private Absolution, cases of heavy sin, or of timorous, scrupulous consciences; and this, either previous to the Holy Communion, or at the hour of death. There is a deep instinctive feeling, by which the soul (unless warped by human systems) does long to lay open any oppressive sin, before it comes into the presence of its Judge. Persons, who for a long period of life have carried about them the oppressive consciousness of some past, secret, sin, cannot bear it then; those who could not bring themselves to endure the pain and shame of confession in life, still often could not bear the thought of carrying their sin with them, unconfessed, into the very Presence of God. "They," says Hooker¹, "which during life and health, are never destitute of ways to delude repentance, do, notwithstanding, oftentimes, when their last hour draweth on, both feel that sting which before lay dead in them, and also thirst after such helps as have always till then been unsavoury." People have, through years of life, purposed to confess (if God enable them) at their death. But what instinctive reverence for Almighty God tells them should be done before death, should, if possible, be done in life. And so souls of the more earnest sort desire to undergo present pain, that they may obtain not forgiveness only, but enlarged grace and increased strength

¹ On "Private Confession and Absolution with us," bk. vi. 4. 15.

against evil, and so the fuller favour of Almighty God.

And this is obviously the more necessary, in sad cases of relapse, where the will is good but weak, and evil habits strong; and men break off a habit for awhile perhaps, and then are overtaken by it, and then perhaps despond, and give themselves up to it, or give up other good habits, as though all were lost.

And, in bad cases of relapse, a person cannot or ought not, without repentance proportionate, to go to the Holy Communion "with a quiet conscience." And so our Church, in her two exhortations, both warns us of the peril of "those who will presume to receive it unworthily," and if we are alarmed by her warnings, directs us how to find relief; which, doubtless, she intended also to encourage by the direction², that "those who intend to be partakers of the Holy Communion shall signify their names to the Curate, at least some time the day before." "Because," says Hooker³, "there are but few that consider how much that part of Divine service, which consisteth in partaking the holy Eucharist, doth import their souls; what they lose by neglect thereof, and what by devout practice they might attain unto; therefore, lest carelessness of general confession should, as commonly it doth, extinguish all remorse of men's particular enormous crimes, our custom (whenever men present themselves at the Lord's

² Rubric at the beginning of the Communion Service.

³ Loc. cit.