

Pius IV., by Paul V., by Gregory XV., by Benedict XIV. They were pointed out by Abélard, by St. Bonaventura, by the learned and saintly Jean Gerson, by Savonarola, by Cardinal Cajetan, by Erasmus. They have been revealed to a horrified world in France, in Spain, in Germany, in Italy, and in England. The paper laid before the Council of Trent by a Romish archbishop contained revelations of the system as damaging as could have been written by any Protestant. As late as 1867 the Congregation of the Inquisition at Rome saw reason to issue an inquiry about these perils, and, although the details are always studiously hushed up, enough has been demonstrated before courts of justice, even in living memory, to show that the same causes lead, in many instances, to the same results.¹

Now it is worse than preposterous to argue that this dangerous practice can be based on the pretence of any inherent priestly power to absolve sin. None but God can say, *Absolve te*. A minister may use the formula in a *purely declarative and hypothetical sense*, which has not the smallest particle of validity apart from that sincere repentance which, as all Scripture tells us, is, and always has been perfectly efficacious, through Christ, without any priestly absolution whatever.² And it is equally futile to dwell on the natural and wholesome impulse of the struggling and penitent soul to unburden itself from the load of a guilty conscience, and to seek remission, in extreme cases, by the consolations of the Gospel. Every clergyman who has made it felt by his readers or hearers.

¹ Even in England at this moment the details of a case are before me in which a servant girl has been invited to confession by her Anglican "priest," against the will of her parents, with results which even ten years ago would have made England ring with indignation. "The Priest in Absolution," issued by the Ritualistic Society of the Holy Cross, was described by Archbishop Tait as "a disgrace to the community." Bishop Wilberforce called the system of confession "one of the worst developments of Popery, a sort of spiritual dram-drinking, fraught with evil to the whole spiritual constitution."

² The Præ-Communion address tells the people that if their conscience cannot otherwise be quieted, and they need further counsel and comfort, "they may come to some discreet and learned minister, that, by the ministry of God's word," they may receive the benefit of absolution. The Rubric in the Order for the Visitation of the Sick rightly recognises that power to pronounce a (hypothetic) declaration of absolution which was given by Christ not "to priests," but "to His Church"; and how little final is the "I absolve you" is proved by the fact that the absolution is immediately followed by a prayer for forgiveness.