

AURICULAR CONFSSION PRAC- TISED BY THE SECTS.

NO part of the disciplinary teaching and practice of the Church has been more bitterly attacked than that relating to confession and the declaration of absolution. It is still the fashion of the more bigoted and illiterate class of nonconformists and of their sympathizers and congeners in the Church, to regard the general absolution at the opening of morning and evening prayer, the Rubric before and the Exhortation in the Communion Office, the Rubric and Absolution in the "Order for the visitation of the sick," as rank Popery. There has occurred within the last few days an interesting case which shows that when opportunity arises those who raise this objection are prepared to follow the teaching and practice of the Church. It appears from a Toronto daily paper that for some time past an American fugitive from justice has been living in Toronto, who "had a fine social standing and was an elder in the Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia." Clearly a man not imbued with Romanist ideas as to priestly functions. Becoming conscience stricken he did not feel satisfied with "confessing his sin to Christ only," as he had been taught was the sole relief to a guilty conscience, but was moved to go to a Wesleyan minister to do exactly what the Church directs in the words: "If any cannot quiet his conscience, but require further comfort or counsel, let him come to some discreet and learned minister of God's Word and open his grief." The minister to whom the man went did not repel him, as by his own principles he ought to have done, but, although only a Wesleyan minister, he claimed the standing and authority of a priest and received auricularly the confession of this troubled soul. The newspaper says, "He related to Mr. Shorey," who is the pastor of Sherbourne St., Toronto, Wesleyan congregation, "some of the domestic troubles that had afflicted his life and asked him, 'Is there any hope at all for a man who is in utter despair?'" Surely a marvellous question for a Presbyterian elder, as exposing the want of practical guidance in their system for those whose troubled spirits call out for something more helpful than eloquence and metaphysics. Mr. Shorey having heard the confession, said: "If you have done anything which should be made right by restitution, you must make that restitution and then stand upon the promises of God, you can then go up to the judgment bar and say in the presence of your Maker: 'I have restored all I could, and I now stand upon those promises.'" These words seem to us somewhat lacking in the Evangelical teaching which the priests of the English Church are commanded to give under like circumstances. There was not a word said about Christ, or the Spirit, or of "newness of life," or of the means of grace; there was no such prayer as our clergy would have offered up, nor reading of Scripture, nor Gospel teaching, such as our Prayer Book provides. There is however, a touch of flippancy which is sadly

out of keeping with so solemn a scene. The words used by the Wesleyan pastor are a paraphrase of our formula of absolution: "Almighty God hath given power and commandment to His ministers to declare and pronounce to His people, being penitent, the absolution and remission of their sins. He pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent and unfeignedly believe His Holy Gospel." The Wesleyan minister declared and pronounced this man so truly pardoned and absolved on his making restitution that he told him he could face his Maker at the Judgment with bold confidence, pleading those very promises upon which our Absolutions are all based! It is very significant that no English Church priest could have gone so far without testing the penitent's faith in the Gospel. We quote this case because the details are in a public paper, the *Toronto Telegram* of the 2nd July. But other cases are known to us, and to others of a like nature, proving that it is probable there are proportionately as many private confessions heard by Nonconformist ministers as by the priests of the Church of England. Indeed it is a common practice for these ministers to sit in their vestries for the purpose of receiving the confessions of those who cannot quiet their own consciences but require further comfort or counsel than they have got out of sermons. The personal troubles poured out into the ear of a pastor are not called "auricular confessions," because the phrase is associated with Popery. But that the ministers of ultra-Protestant sects habitually receive confessions and pronounce and declare absolution by applying the general promises of God to individual souls, is not only demonstrated by the case above quoted, but by the standing invitation given from the pulpits for all in need of spiritual direction to "consult the pastor in the vestry." We need hardly say that the Church of England has no provision for habitual private confession. The exhortation in the Communion office implies that the occasions are rare and exceptional for men to open their grief to a minister, and the rubric of the visitation of the sick applies to those only who are "very sick," and then only when the conscience of the sufferer is troubled with a "weighty matter," which may be standing between a dying man and salvation in eternity, as the unavowed, unrepented consciousness of it may have been his ruin in time. There is one point in this case, which differentiates it from any possible case in the Church, as no clergyman would make a public parade in a newspaper of what had been told him ministerially. The unauthorized publication of a confession before trial may do a terrible wrong.

SURPLICE VERSUS BLACK GOWN.

WHEN we look out upon the vast masses of people who are living like heathens in Christian lands, and regard the appalling indifference and selfishness of those who name the name of Christ, it would seem impossible that earnest men could be bribed into giving

a passing thought even for such a miserable controversy as that of the question of surplice and black gown. But so it is, that the power of darkness so cramps, befogs and, belittles the minds of some good men, that they enter into a dispute of this kind as though the Church would collapse if the black gown were not retained as a pulpit vestment. The following letter from an Evangelical clergyman of some prominence in the party, shows that the drift of clerical opinion is dead against those who make the black gown the test of a standing or a falling Church. The Rev. I. Barton, vicar of Trinity Church, Cambridge, England, commenced using the surplice in the pulpit and thereupon was requested by the Evangelical Protestant Union "to return to a speed", permanent and regular use of the black gown."

Mr. Barton replied: "If it were true, as the letter avers, that the black gown in the pulpit is the distinctive mark of Evangelical Protestantism, we should be indeed in evil case, for it is only too plain that it is rapidly giving place everywhere to the surplice, and will probably, in a few years more, be a thing of the past. Happily our English Protestantism has a much firmer basis to rest on, and I believe that that basis was never more sure and stable than at present.

Mr. Barton gave a fatal blow to the fond superstition which makes the black gown the distinctive mark of Evangelical Protestantism by the following letter:

MY DEAR MR. HOLLIS—I wish to add a few words to what I have already written on the use of the surplice in the pulpit. You speak in your letter of the black gown as being the distinctive mark of Evangelical Protestantism. I cannot for a moment admit this. *The academic gown in the pulpit is in no sense whatever more Protestant or distinctly a Reformation dress than the surplice*, and there is no more reason for the use of the one or the other in the pulpit than of convenience or custom. I mean that no question whatever of Popish vestments can possibly enter, for the surplice is not a Roman dress like the alb or the chasuble, and it has never been used in the pulpit in the Romish Church. The use of the surplice is, as we know well enough here in Cambridge, by no means limited to the clergy; indeed, we may truly say of it that it is a lay dress, proscribed by ancient custom to be worn by those engaged in the act of public worship, and is a standing witness to what I would call the ministerial office of the laity. The gown, on the other hand, marks the wearer as one who has received the Bishop's licence to preach. Formerly it was by no means the case that every parish minister was qualified to preach. Our own Church records afford an example of this, as they contain an invitation signed by the minister of that day (1610) and some twenty of his congregation to Dr. Sibbes, then master of St. Catharine's, asking him to occupy the pulpit of Trinity Church on Sunday afternoon for a general town lecture. So far then from thinking, as some do, that the surplice confers a higher ecclesiastical status than the gown, the reverse