Our Weekly Sermon

INDULGENCES.

A Lucid Explanation of This Catholic Doctrine.

To the current number of the Nineteenth Century and After, Right Rev. Bishop Hedley, of Newport, South Wales, contributes a lucid explanation of the Catholic doctrine of indulgences. This article, it may be interesting to note, was procured by the publishers of the above magazine and given prominent place in its pages on account of protests voiced by Cardinal Vaughan and others with regard to a false and malicious statement made in a previous issue by the contributor of an article on the Passion Play at Oberammergau. After reading Bishop Hedley's exposition one is almost tempted to place the offending contributor previously referred to in the ranks of the Church's benefactors.

Premising his remarks with the ecclesiastical definition of the word indulgences, which signifies remission, he divides his essay into two parts, one dealing with the meaning attached to the word by the Church, the other with the justification she has for her doctrine and practice. Dr. Hedley takes the words of the catechism as an answer to the first question, "an indulgence is the remission of the temporal punishment which often remains due to sin after its guilt has been forgiven."

The Catholic view is that, even after the guilty stain has been taken away, and the dread sentence is no longer to be feared, some punishment may still remain. This punishment could not be "everlasting" or "eternal." It would come to an end some time. It is therefore called "temporal" punishment, as opposed to "eternal."

The Lutheran and Calvinistic idea of "sin" goes far to explain the view held by many outside the Church that "temporal punishment after remission of guilt" is impossible. The belief that sin, even when pardoned, had to be expiated, has always been held by the Church, and from it sprung the "canonical penances" of the early Church.

Sin, although forgiven, had to be punished in this world or in the next. Punishment in the world to come meant Purgatory, punishment anticipated in this world meant the limitation of the pains of Purgatory not the escaping from them altogether. Hence, in those days the murderer and the adulterer were made to undergo a more or less lengthy discipline of fasting and of exclusion from the company of the faithful in and out of the church, and it was taught that every kind of suffering or adversity, whether sent by God through the circumstances of life, or voluntarily taken up, had the power of expiation. It must not be supposed that God was imagined to be a despotic and capricious tyrant who took pleasure in exacting the last farthing. There is a sense, warranted by Scripture, in which it is true that the Divine justice does require the last farthing. But the teaching of the Fathers and of the Catholic Church was then—as it has always been—that suffering, to be efficacious, must be accepted by the heart, and that its value consists in turning the heart to God, in intensifying spiritual acts, and in purifying the passions and appetites.

Since the Church possesses the power to impose a canonical penance, she also is able to remit one; in this latter act of jurisdiction we have an "indulgence." The Church, moreover, claims the power of remitting penalties which she herself has not inflicted, and on the falling into disuse of canonical penances, the Church, "stretching her hand into the unseen and using the power of the Keys," did not hesitate to free her children from the penances that remained due to sin, penances none the less real because she had ceased to emphasize them by her own penalties.

PLENARY AND PARTIAL.

In this way is explained the peculiar phraseology of the grants of an indulgence. For indulgences are either plenary—that is, full—or partial. The word "plenary," explains itself. It means the complete remission of all the temporal punishment to which a penitent may be liable in the sight of God at the time. The partial indulgences are always expressed in terms of time, as an indulgence of a year, or forty days, etc.

These terms of time are taken from the ancient penitential discipline of the Church. To receive an indulgence of a year, for example, is to have remitted to one so much temporal punishment as was represented by a year's canonical penance. If you ask me to define the amount more accurately, I say that it cannot be done. No one knows how severe or how long a Purgatory was, or is, implied in a hundred days of canonical penance, indeed the very expression itself indicates a penalty subject to variation, for a year of one sort of punishment is not equivalent to a year of another. These things are veiled from our sight and are among the hidden things of Divine mercy and justice. What the Catholic Church teaches is, first, that she can make plenary remission of punishment; and, secondly, that the partial indulgences, although we do not know exactly what they avail to remit, do most assuredly and mercifully remit in some degree those chastisements which are deserved.

CHURCH'S CLAIM JUSTIFIED.

Having thus explained the meaning attached by the Church to the word indulgence, the Bishop passes on to indicate the line of reasoning by which the Church justifies her claim to the prerogative of granting indulgences. He sets out by laying down the doctrine that the souls of Christians are subject by the will of Jesus Christ to a certain spiritual jurisdiction, which can remit or refrain from remitting the sins and the consequences of the sins of the flock. This is the power of "binding and loosing" given to the Apostles and specifically to St. Peter. This power of the Keys extends to the remission of the temporal punishment which often remains due to forgiven sin.

It is the Catholic doctrine that, by the will and commission of Christ, and through the merits of His Blood, the Church, through her pardon, has power of losing a soul, not only—as in the Sacrament of Penance—from sin itself, but also from that punishment which it would otherwise have undergo either on this earth or in Purgatory. This is the whole doctrine of indulgences. As will be seen it is not a doctrine that stands by itself or that can be considered apart from the two great Catholic doctrines of inherent righteousness through Christ's Blood by repentance, and the prerogative of the pastorate to bind and loose. Those who dispute these two dogmatic and fundamental articles will also dispute the doctrine of indulgences. But it is surely not claiming too much to assert that, if they are admitted, they alone, taken together, suffice to make it reasonable and valid.

SOME POPULAR FALLACIES.

The reviewer next applies himself to meeting some of the more usual popular fallacies in regard to indulgences. His answer to the statement that the Catholic doctrine implicitly denies the all-sufficiency of the merits of Christ to forgive, satisfy and remit all sin and its punishment is a denial of the smallest claim that guilt and punishment are remitted otherwise than through the merits of Christ.

The whole question is, whether, always supposing that Christ is the first cause, there may not be secondary causes—causes, ministers or instruments—which derive all their efficacy and virtue from Christ's merits, but are true and efficient causes all the same? . . . . . The sacerdotal and intercessory theories, I am aware, are bitterly denounced by many. I have no objection to their being argued against; but to denounce them as derogating from the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice or the completeness of His satisfaction is a simple misunderstanding.

The Church not only uses the power of the Keys to remit, but considers that she has something to offer which satisfies. Whence does she get the "satisfaction" which she dispenses and which God accepts as expiation for the souls for whom she offers it? In other words, what is meant by the "treasure of the Church?"

What, then, is meant by the "treasure of the Church"—ecclesiae thesaurus? The expression, as I need not say, is metaphorical. It signifies a certain supply and abundance of spiritual advantages which it is in the Church's power to dispense. It exists in the invisible treasury of God's holy will and acceptance. It consists primarily and completely of the merit and satisfaction of Christ our Saviour. It includes also the superfluous merit and satisfaction of the blessed Virgin and the saints. What do we mean by the word "superfluous?" In one way, as I need not say, a saint has no superfluous merit. Whatever he has, he wants it all for himself, because the more he merits on earth—by Christ's grace—the greater his glory in heaven. But, speaking of mere satisfaction for punishment due, there cannot be a doubt that some of the saints have done more than was needed in justice to expiate the punishment due to their own sins. . . . It is this "superfluous" expiation that accumulates in the "treasure of the Church."

These principles, writes the Bishop, do away with the objection that, by adding the satisfactions of the saints to those of our Divine Saviour we are impeaching on the all-sufficiency of His satisfaction.

Our view is, on the contrary, that He has not only superabundantly satisfied for all men's guilt and sin, but that He has imparted the efficacy of "satisfaction" to the works of His saints as to secondary agencies. The Catholic view is—and I think a very natural one—that it is more glorious to Jesus Christ to constitute and give efficacy to a magnificent kosmos of subordinate agency than to be Himself the sole, as he is the primary, effective cause. Can anyone doubt that this great principle is clearly indicated in Holy Scripture? It was on the day before the night of the destruction of the Assyrian host that God sent this message to Ezechias:—"I will protect this city for My own sake, and for the sake of David, My servant."

STATE OF GRACE IS NECESSARY.

After disposing of the erroneous allegation made by non-Catholics that indulgences forgive sins, past or future, Dr. Hedley goes on to explain the real meaning of grant of indulgence a poena et culpa. The explanation afforded by most theological writers is that the words do not pretend to remit guilt, and that, in order to gain any indulgence, the "state of grace" is necessary.

Many Catholic writers think—and I agree with them—that it is a condensed form of expressing the two points which the grant of a great indulgence always contains—the remission of punishment (as explained) and the removal of reservation of jurisdiction in the confessional. To understand the latter point, it must be remembered that for an indulgence confession is required. Now, in the middle ages, and to a certain extent at this day, there are a number of heinous descriptions of sin which an ordinary priest has no power over (in the confessional), but which the Bishop, or even the Holy Father, "reserves" to his own jurisdiction. This is often very hard upon the penitent—and it is intended to be hard. But, at a jubilee or great indulgence, this reservation is generally taken off, so that any confessor can deal with any sins whatsoever. There seems to be little doubt that the expression, a poena et culpa was a stock phrase conveying in a condensed and convenient form what I have stated. And if it was ever used by a Pope, or if it is ever used again, this was, or will be, its significance.

NOTHING TO HIDE.

In conclusion, the Bishop makes it clear that the doctrine of indulgences and its practical outcome are not things that the Church wishes to conceal or to apologize for.

On the contrary Catholics are convinced that the preaching and the practice of indulgences are of the utmost profits to the souls of Christians, religiously, morally and devotionally. They protect the true doctrine of sin and sin's remission. . . . The doctrine of indulgences keeps alive the grand truth that a soul may be holy and yet may be liable to punishment, may be in that state deserving of everlasting bliss and yet not pure enough to be admitted at once. . . . The doctrine of indulgences keeps up faith in the world to come. . . . Morally, the practice of indulgences, as Catholics well know by experience, let to make the Christain heart more and more sensitive to the defilement of sin, and more and more inclined to religious ways. If the doctrine of indulgences is liable to abuse, it shares in this respect with many of the most Divine and profitable ordinances that our Redeemer has left us. If the practice of that teaching has been abused, the Sovereign Pontiff and the Bishops, and the vast body of the clergy and laity, are united in a firm determination to put down all such abuses, as far as human endeavor can do so. But the doctrine and the practice will go on. We are anxious that non-Catholics should understand our position, and when they do, it will certainly be found that their opposition and dislike are grounded not on the behavior of the mediaeval pardoners, the rapacity of the German questors, or the incautious language of a preacher here and there, but really on differences and (as we hold) errors of their own which lie much deeper, and which affect the fundamental doctrines of the religion of Jesus Christ.

ARE CATHOLICS PRIEST RIDDEN?

The Independent, a Protestant paper, has this to say upon an old subject:—"From the elaborate statistics of the diverse Christian denominations published, we gather the result that the adjective, 'priest-ridden,' attaches not to Catholics, but in its fullest sense to Protestant denominations. These very statistics show that the Catholic priests have the largest parishes and the Baptists the smallest, that the Methodists have four times as many churches and three times as many ministers, the Baptists nearly five times as many ministers as there are Catholic priests in the country, although they have little more than one-half the communicants. The result is that there are only ninety Baptists on an average to one of their churches; 110 Methodists to each of their congregations, whilst the average number of Catholics to one church is not less than 707."

CORNATION STONE.

The Stone of Destiny used in Ireland's Crownings.

The following letter appeared in the Ottawa Free Press in a recent issue. The letter is interesting, in that it throws some light upon Ireland's early customs.—Editor Free Press:—In your paper of Saturday you give a little bit of interesting history about the Coronation Stone, the Stone of Destiny, used for some hundreds of years by the Scottish Nation as an oracle in the coronation of their kings, which was so ruthlessly carried to England by Edward the First. But your historian did not tell us that this sacred relic was originally the property of the Irish nation, as you can see by the following from a history of Ireland by the Rev. D. Falloon, D.D., Protestant minister:—"The general use of sacred stones in the ritual of the Druidical religion is one of those numerous indications that we have of its eastern origin, but the sepulchral monuments of the Irish appear to have passed from that region to them, not directly, like many of their other rites, but through the northern nations of Europe, one use, however, that was made of particular stones was that either at them or on them the princes and chiefs of this race were generally inaugurated. Indeed, a marked instance of this use of a stone is evinced in the case of that which was called in Ireland Lee-Fail, but which has been Latinized into Saxum Fatale, or the Stone of Destiny, which was once held in such veneration by the Christian Princes, of the reigning families, as well as by their pagan ancestors. Both these classes of rulers seem to have considered it as the paladium of their Empire, and, to have supposed that their dynasty was secure as long as they could keep possession of it. This stone was probably kept at Tara, where the Irish monarchs were elected and inaugurated. It was customary with the candidate for the throne to sit over this oracle in the sanctuary in which it was placed, and by some contrivance of the Druids, such sounds were emitted as pronounced the destiny of the person incumbent. At what time this oracular relic was removed to Scotland cannot now be determined with. Mr. O'Flaherty thought that it was sent thither by Hugh Finslaith, the son-in-law of Kenneth MacAlpine, to assure him of the subjection of the Picts, who he had conquered some years before. It was kept with the greatest veneration at the Abbey of Scone, the Royal seat of the Pictish and subsequently of the Scottish kings, until Edward the First of England had it removed in the year 1300, to Westminster, where it is said it still lies under the coronation chair of Queen Victoria. It is commonly called Jacob's Stone, from a notion that has prevailed that it was a fragment of that which Jacob used as a pillow upon the first night of his flight from Beersheba to Padanaram." So you can readily see, Mr. Editor, that it is not in great wars only the Irish have supported England." But the foundation of her throne rests on a good solid Irish foundation brought from the great Hall of Tara's Kings.

ED. CORRIDAN.

DUKE OF NORFOLK SPEAKS.

The Duke of Norfolk in a letter to the Press, declares that he has never known so many untrue statements in the newspapers in connection with any matter, as with the address above given. He denies that the newspapers Ossarvatore Romano and Voce Della Verita were seized by the Italian Government for publishing the address, that the hotels at which the English pilgrims stopped in Rome were guarded to prevent the people attacking them, and similar allegations. The duke adds:—

"The whole agitation is an artificial one, engineered by a section of the press. The calm dignity and friendliness of the Roman people in face of the incident was in contrast to the hysteria of some persons in England."

Referring to that part of the address which has been condemned as an attack on Protestantism and religious freedom, the Duke says:—

"We condemn certain proselyting methods which have lately been practiced in Rome in regard to the children of the poor, and I declined to believe that those who condemned the address approve of methods which are in abuse of liberty. I was assured in Rome that the English Protestants there, as a body, held aloof from the movement, that few, if any, participated in it, and that its financial supplies came principally from across the Atlantic."

Defending the prayer contained in the address for the restoration of the Pope's temporal power, the Duke contends that every statesman favorable to the cause of united Italy must echo the prayer, as the principal cause which makes for disunion in Italy arises from the position of the Papacy.

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