

A POWERFUL SERMON.

WHOSE SINS YOU SHALL FORGIVE THEY ARE FORGIVEN THEM."

Most Striking Proofs of the Validity of the Sacrament of Penance—Irrefutable Arguments; Telling Comparisons; Undisputable Authorities—An Eloquent and Effective Exposition of the Subject.

The Rev. Father McCallen, SS., of St. Patrick's—the spirit of our temperance movements, the eloquent preacher, and powerful lecturer—delivered the following sermon, three weeks ago, in St. Patrick's Church. It should be read carefully and pondered over by every Catholic in the land—and by every Protestant as well:

"Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose you shall retain, they are retained." (ST. JOHN XX: 23.)

The Gospel of this day, dearly beloved brethren, gives an account of the institution of the Sacrament of Penance, as the means ordained by God for the forgiveness of our sins. One of our daily papers, in a series of "Communications," sent to it by one who seizes every occasion of maligning a ministry of which he was deemed unworthy, has spread far and wide numberless calumnies against the Catholic doctrine and practice of confession. I therefore gladly profit by the Gospel just read to you, to examine briefly the arguments on which this doctrine and practice rest. The Catholic Church teaches that Christ died for all men, and that by his death He atoned for the sins of the whole world. Notwithstanding this fact, no one, even among our Protestant friends, will dare to affirm that this redemption has been availed of, or will be availed of by all men. Men have sinned, will continue to sin, and too many of them will die in their sins and thus lose the fruits of Christ's redemption. The whole question, therefore, is, by what means may each one of us apply to himself the merits of the Redemption,—by what means may individual souls receive the pardon of their sins. In discussing this question, the enemies of the Catholic Church constantly fight shy of the words of the text by which I have opened this instruction. If ever there has been a sermon preached from that text in any Protestant pulpit of this city,

I HAVE FAILED TO HEAR OF IT.

And though I have asked the question many times from my Protestant friends, whether they ever heard a sermon based on that text, the answer has invariably been no! Only last summer, while discussing the religious question with an elderly Protestant gentleman, a leading member of one of the leading churches of this city, I put the question: "How is it that your ministers, who frequently preach on the necessity of getting sins forgiven, never refer to the text of St. John's Gospel xx: 23. I received for answer: "Well, I suppose it is because that text savors too strongly of Catholic doctrine and practice." Now, I trust this is not the reason; for if it were, it would not speak well for the good faith of any Bible reader, who would deliberately set aside any portion of God's word simply because it accented a Catholic doctrine. The answer, however, confirmed me in my belief, that the text is a strong proof of confession as a means for the forgiveness of sins. There is no doubt at all that, had our Divine Lord so wished, He could have directly forgiven us our sins, or used for that purpose, another ministry than that of men. The question for both Catholics and Protestants is, not what way we think would be the best, the most desirable, the most convenient, or the least trying and troublesome, but what is the manner chosen by Christ, who, having redeemed us from sin, alone has the right to declare by what means He desires His redemption applied to our individual souls. Now the Catholic Church claims, and for eighteen hundred years has established her claim, that Christ desires sins to be forgiven through the ministry of men validly ordained for that purpose. The proof is first of all offered by this day's gospel. On the evening of the very day on which our Blessed Lord rose from the dead, He ap-

peared in the midst of his apostles, who were gathered together in a room for fear of the Jews. "Peace be to you," He said. "As the Father has sent me, I send you." When he had said this He breathed upon them, and He said to them: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost, whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose you shall retain, they are retained". (St. John xx: 22, 23.) If these words do not prove the doctrine of Catholic confession, then must I begin my study of the English language over again; for even if I had not the authoritative interpretation of an infallible Church as my guide, the impossibility of twisting any other meaning out of these words would be a sufficiently striking argument

IN FAVOR OF CATHOLIC CONFESSION.

First of all, Christ makes known His own mission and power. "As the Father has sent Me." You, my dear apostles, have had proofs of my heavenly mission in the purity of my doctrine and in the stupendous miracles which I have wrought in your presence. You have been my witnesses, that I have made the blind to see, the lame to walk, the leper to be cleansed. You cannot forget how I multiplied the five loaves and fed five thousand men, nor how I raised even the dead to life. And last of all, though I was crucified and died and was buried but three days since, you behold me now among you gloriously arisen by my own power. Here, then, is my authority, and I exercise it." As the Father has sent Me, I send you." I give you a most wonderful and consoling mission. I appoint you to be ministers of mercy to My repentant people. I shall soon return to My Father, and I leave you and your successors the power to apply in my name and by my authority, to every soul who is worthy, the merits of My redemption for the pardon of his sins. Therefore, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost, whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." In no clearer words was power ever deputed to another than this power of forgiving and retaining sins was given to the Apostles. If to the Apostles, of course, to their legitimate successors also. For since the Church of Christ was to last to the end of time, the faithful in all ages had as just a claim to the forgiveness of their sins through the means instituted by Christ, as had the privileged few who lived in Apostolic times. Now, was this power as a sealed document to be laid aside and kept merely as a precious souvenir, or was it to be used? Most certainly to be used. But how could the Apostles and their successors use this power and become judges whether the sinner was worthy or not of pardon, unless they knew the sins of their penitents? How could they know these sins, since so many were secret and hidden, unless the sinner made a disclosure of them; and what is this disclosure, this self-accusation, but a confession? Therefore, by the words just quoted, did Christ establish confession as one of the parts of the sacrament of Penance for the forgiveness of sins. I say one of the parts of the sacrament; for the Church has always taught that contrition or sorrow, with a firm purpose of amendment, must accompany the confession, as well as satisfaction for injury done to God by sin, and to neighbor in property or reputation. To confirm my argument, let me make use of

A COMPARISON.

Let us suppose that by law the Governor-General is empowered at certain times of the year to visit our prisons and grant pardon and liberty to such of the convicts as may have proved themselves, by their conduct, worthy of his clemency. Let us suppose further that not only has he this power himself, but that he can depute another to act in his name. If from the City Hall steps, in presence of ten thousand of our citizens, he were in a loud voice to depute another in words similar to those of our text: "As the law authorizes me, I authorize you—go to the prison, and whomsoever you shall release shall be released, and whomsoever you shall retain shall be retained,"—would there be one of those ten thousand citizens who, knowing the law, would interpret the Governor-General's words in any other sense than that the deputy received full power in the name, and by the authority, of the Governor-General to release those prisoners who would have proved themselves worthy of freedom? And if he had the power, would he not use it? Would he not go the jail, and since the

prisoners would not consent to accuse themselves, would he not learn from the wardens the crime for which A, B, or C were convicted, their good or bad conduct while in prison, and then, in the exercise of his best judgment, say: "A and B, you have by your conduct merited pardon; you have shown true sorrow for your past crimes; you give promise of leading better lives in the future—go, you are released. C, you are unworthy; you manifest no sorrow; you give no promise of better behavior in the future than you did in the past—remain here, I refuse to pardon you?"

So the confessor in the Catholic Church says to the Pope, as well as to the humblest child who kneels at his feet to make the accusation of their daily faults: "May the Lord Jesus Christ absolve you, and by His authority do I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

I cannot for want of time develop the argument drawn from other texts of Holy Scripture, as when, in Matthew xviii: 18, Christ says to his Apostles: "Whosoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven;" and from Acts xix: 18, "Many that believed came and confessed and declared their deeds," and again where St. Paul (1 Corinth. xi: 28) bids those who would receive the body and blood of the Lord worthily to first prove themselves, "Let a man prove himself"—for I desire to touch on another proof that sacramental confession is the means ordained by Christ for the forgiveness of sins which is not less convincing than the plain words of Holy Scripture. That proof consists of what is called *prescription*, namely, since confession is in practice all over the Catholic Church to-day, we have a prescriptive right to believe that it comes to us from

CHRIST AND HIS APOSTLES.

unless we can be given the name of the man or men who introduced it, or the age and place in which it came first to be used. Possession is three-fourths of the law, and in our case, since we can trace back possession to the very time of Christ and His Apostles, it is more than three-fourths of the law. It is the whole law. When Protestantism sprang into existence at the time of the so-called Reformation, confession was universally practiced by the members of the Catholic Church. Luther was a priest; he heard confessions, gave absolution, and went to confession himself. Henry VIII., though a king, knelt at the feet of his confessor as humbly as the poorest child in his kingdom; and Calvin, whose parents destined him for the priesthood, approached likewise the Sacrament of Penance. Their very protestation against confession, after they left the Church, proves it to have been then in use. Now will any man tell us when, where, and by whom the doctrine and practice of confession were first started? Two hundred years before Luther's time Wickliffe inveighed against confession as something superfluous and unnecessary. Therefore it must have been in use among the faithful of Wickliffe's time. If we go back one hundred years still earlier, namely, to the thirteenth century, we find the IV. Council of Lateran, held in 1215, complaining that too many of the faithful failed to approach the Sacrament of Penance as often as they should, and therefore the fathers of that Council decreed that, "under pain of excommunication, the faithful of both sexes, who had arrived at the years of discretion, should confess their sins at least once a year." The Protestant writers who fail to accept this decree in the sense in which it was given and who see in these words the first mention of confession, are indeed hard pressed for an argument against the Catholic doctrine on this point, as they close their eyes to the historical fact that long before the Lateran Council the Fathers of the Church spoke and wrote of the Catholic confessional as having come to them from Christ Himself. Let us gather together but a few from among the many links which bind us to apostolic times. St. Bernard, writing during the twelfth century, addresses his people as follows:

"If you are ashamed now to confess your sins to a single man, a sinner like yourselves, what will be your shame on the day of judgment, when your crimes will be exposed to the view of the whole world?"

In the ninth century we find Charlemagne appointing confessors to every regiment of his army. In the eighth

we behold King Pepin kneeling humbly at the feet of his confessor, St. Viron. In the fifth, St. Augustin seems never to tire of writing on the subject of confession as a means of reconciliation with God: "Man, confess to a man. Sinner, confess thy sins to a sinner like thyself." And again: "Let him who desires to confess his sins, in order to recover grace, seek out a priest who knows how to bind and loose." In the same century St. John Chrysostom writes: "You have sinned a thousand times. Have recourse a thousand times to the Sacrament of Penance." In the fourth century, St. Jerome reminds priests of their duties to their penitents: "It is necessary for the priest, after having heard the different sins of those who accuse themselves, to know which he ought to bind, which to loose;" and St. Basil: "We ought to confess to those to whom the dispensation of the mysteries of God is accredited." In the third century, St. Cyprian thus gives testimony to the practice of confession among the faithful: "Sinners examine their consciences, and make known to the priest the burden which weighs them down." In the second century we find Origen referring to this sacrament of reconciliation and the disclosure of sins to the priest "as the pardon of sins by penance." While Irenæus, who was a disciple of the Blessed Polycarp, who in turn was the disciple of St. John, the beloved disciple of Christ, informs us that "some women came to the church and accused themselves of secret crimes." Of others, he writes: "Some touched in conscience publicly confessed their sins; while others in despair renounced their faith," which they certainly need not have done if there were any other method of reconciliation with God than the Sacrament of Penance.

THESE THEN ARE SOME OF THE MANY LINKS

which bind the Catholic confessing his sins to a priest in the nineteenth century, with the members of Christ's Church in all ages seeking reconciliation by this same means, the only one established by our Lord, Who said to His Apostles and to their successors: "Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven them." If we add to what has been said, the well known historical fact that all the Eastern sectaries, in spite of their hatred of the Church of Rome, nevertheless make use of confession as a means of getting sin forgiven, we must conclude that they do so because they firmly believe that confession has been instituted by Christ, and not by any man or set of men in the Roman Catholic Church, whose authority in this matter they certainly would refuse to accept. In presence of these proofs of the institution of the Sacrament of Penance as the means ordained by Christ for the forgiveness of sin, how are we to explain the conduct of such Protestants as ridicule or reject confession, or who bring themselves to believe that this "butchery of souls," as the first reformers called it, has been hoisted on to the Church by some man, or men, not known; at some time or other which never has been fixed; or in some place, the name of which has not yet appeared on the pages of history? We know the names of all sectaries who have separated from the Church, the time and place in which they began their heresies. We know when and by whom this continent has been discovered. We can give the names of all the great inventors of every age. But the name of the man or men who imposed the burden of confessing one's sins to a rightly ordained priest, no one has yet been able to give, simply because it was not man but the Divine Master Himself who said: "Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven them."

But what is still more strange and cruel, a Voltaire, a Gibbon, a Leibnitz, though not of us, have, however, paid their tribute of admiration to the wonderful and salutary results of Catholic confession; but a man in this city whose voice and pen have ever been used to vilify the Church of which he was adjudged

AN UNWORTHY MINISTER;

whose voice and pen have for years been used to fill the ears and minds of innocent youth with filthy and immoral thoughts; whose hatred of the Catholic Church has led him to insult not only its priests, but the mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of its people; who in the public press has, without one single protest from Protestant pulpit, or one single