

**AN ESSAY ON
CONFESSION, PENANCE,
AND ABSOLUTION.**

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An essay on confession, penance, and absolution. by Mr. Roger Laurence

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ON

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BY

MR. ROGER LAURENCE

A LAYMAN OF QUEEN ANNE'S TIME.



*Occasioned by the Publication of Two Sermons preached at
Salisbury the 5th and 7th of November, 1710.*

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P R E F A C E.

THE following short treatise on Confession was written by Mr. Roger Laurence, a learned and religious layman, who lived in the reign of Queen Anne. It was designed as an answer to two sermons preached at Salisbury, on the 5th and 7th of November, 1710, by the latitudinarian Bishop Burnet, who had spoken disparagingly of Confession and Absolution, calling them a "Contrivance of Popery."

Mr. Laurence was anything but a Papist or Romanizer, as may be seen from the very first page of the essay. His whole argument is based on Holy Scripture, and the formularies of the English Church. He was one of those laymen who felt aggrieved that the consolation and privilege held out by the Church, of which he was an earnest member, should be depreciated or denied.

to the laity, by the ignorance and prejudice of some of the Clergy.

Confession in the English Church is entirely a layman's question; a question affecting those who desire to make confession,—not those who have to hear it. Priests claim no authority to enforce confession; it is purely optional. There is no withholding of the Holy Communion, as in the Roman Catholic Church, from those who do not choose to confess their sins. This practice was given up at the Reformation, while at the same time the English Church retained the ordinance in its fullest and most authoritative form, for those amongst her sons who desired it; suggesting certain occasions on which the use of it would be most profitable, “moving” and “exhorting” persons, under certain circumstances, to avail themselves of it; and in no case discouraging or prohibiting it.

The question, therefore, if question it can be called, is not concerning any power claimed by the Priesthood, but with regard to the privileges of the laity,—whether persons desiring Confession and Absolution are to be allowed them, or not. The Church, in her exhortation to communicate, *directs*, that those who cannot quiet their own *consciences*, shall go to their parochial Priest,

or some other learned and discreet minister of God's Word, (for free liberty of choice is given them,) and "open their grief, that, by the ministry of God's Word, they may receive the benefit of absolution." The question now seriously mooted is, whether persons thus seeking relief of conscience may have it; whether the minister to whom they apply for aid shall willingly hear them, or whether he shall discourage—perhaps even refuse to receive—their confession, and refer them back to their own unassisted efforts. So again in the service for the Visitation of the Sick, when it is directed that the sick man, troubled in conscience, shall be moved to make special confession of his sins; and when, on doing so, he shall humbly and earnestly desire absolution, it is disputed whether such confession shall be received, and such absolution be given, except in the most extreme cases, and grudgingly even then.

Evidently, therefore, it is simply and practically a layman's question; a question of privilege, whether those who desire to make confession shall be heard, or not, by the Priests of the English Church. By God's grace, there is a great stirring of men's spirits. Many who have long lived in impenitence, or sorrow of heart, have been brought to perceive that the privilege of confession is the

very remedy suited to their soul's disease ; others, who have already found its salutary efficacy, communicate to those dear to them the experience of their own change of heart, or relief from the burden of sin. Amongst the Clergy, too, those who know the great value of the ordinance, from the results which they have witnessed of comfort and consolation to the afflicted—a new life of hope and cheerful duty, instead of one of sorrow and remorse,—these too add their testimony, to swell the cry for its restoration.

But by a strange conjunction of circumstances, penitents, thus anxious for the means of grace, who, one would think, would be gladly welcomed by the Pastors of souls, have not unfrequently the greatest difficulty, in consequence of the prevailing prejudice, in obtaining what they seek. Some do not find, in their whole neighbourhood, a Priest who is willing to hear their confession. The consequence is, that some are driven to the Roman Catholic communion ; others are thrown back upon their impenitence and desolation.

This state of things cannot last. The number of those who desire the privilege of confession increases daily ; and it is manifest that Churchmen will not willingly consent to be restricted in the *privilege to which the formularies of the Church*

invite them. When the Church declares that the sick shall be moved to make special confession, and openly invites those who are doubtful of their fitness to receive Holy Communion, to resort to a minister of God's Word, and open their grief, in order that they may receive the benefit of absolution, it is certain that the negligence or prejudice of the Priesthood will not long be admitted a sufficient reason for debarring the laity from an undoubted privilege.

It is, as I have said, no question of power or prerogative to the Priesthood. Few offices involve more trouble and pain than that of Confessor, though not unmixed with deep satisfaction. However, the question is, not whether confession is to be forced on the laity against their will, but whether, if they desire it, they are to be denied it.

The following tract, written by a layman nearly one hundred and fifty years ago, contains so able a treatment of the Scriptural bearings of the case, that I have thought it useful to reprint it, as conducive to the right understanding of this deeply important and practical question.

W. GRESLEY.

BRIGHTON,
April 19th, 1852.