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THE "PRIEST OF PENITENCE."

In the penitential system of the early Church a marked distinction was drawn between notorious and secret sins. While the former were confessed openly in the presence of the congregation, it would appear that secret sins were not as a rule confessed publicly. The actual instances of such a practice are not numerous, and some of the facts quoted by Protestant controversialists in support of its universal prevalence are irrelevant, *e.g.*, the famous cases of Potamius, and, later, of Robert, bishop of Le Mans. Both these prelates confessed their secret offences not to the Church at large, but to their fellow-bishops assembled in council. The avowal of secret sins was usually entrusted to the ears of a priest, whose selection was originally left to the penitent, and at a later time determined by the ecclesiastical authorities, who, by the middle of the fourth century, had apparently appointed a "Priest of Penitence" in the various Churches of the East and West. In short, the duties attached to the *ὁ ἐπὶ τῆς μετανοίας πρεσβύτερος* in the days of Socrates and Sozomen, were performed by the priesthood in general during the earlier centuries of the Church's existence, when the secret offender confessed to and sought counsel from any suitable minister,—*τῶν ἄριστα πολιτευομένων ἐχέμυθόν τε καὶ ἔμφρονα.* The object with which a sinner made his actions known to the priest was to obtain spiritual guidance and absolution. If his offence was such that open acknowledgment of it would be expedient, he was directed to make such a confession and obtain public absolution; if it were better to hide it from the public eye, private absolution would be given him together with, perhaps, the imposition of a public or private penance. The "Priest of Penitence" was especially consulted by those who wished to learn whether or not they were in a fit state to join in the Eucharist.

It is strange that our only information as to this office is derived from two ecclesiastical historians whose accounts do not altogether harmonize. If the office was instituted after the close of the Decian persecution, as Socrates asserts, why does Sozomen derive its origin ἐξ ἀρχῆς? Again, if we accept Sozomen's statement that the office, though abolished in the East, continued to flourish in the West, and especially at Rome, how comes it that all the records of the West, whether histories, lives of saints, canons or inscriptions, preserve an unbroken silence as to the existence of the "Priest of Penitence"? The question is full of difficulty. Socrates' account is usually accepted as more valid than that of the other historian, but, I think, without adequate reason. The inaccuracy shown by Socrates in other matters much nearer to his own time is notorious; and when we find private confession to priests recommended *before the Decian persecution*, we may conclude that there is little warrant for arbitrarily fixing upon that period as the date of the institution of the Pententiary Priest, and that Sozomen's ἐξ ἀρχῆς rightly implies that the origin of this office had already been forgotten by the middle of the fifth century.

The office of Penitentiary was abolished by Nectarius, in the reign of Theodosius, on account of a scandal which had arisen from the injudicious conduct of the priest who held it. This action on the part of the Bishop of Constantinople was soon followed throughout the East, and the ὁ ἐπὶ τῆς μετανοίας πρεσβύτερος survived only amongst certain heretical sects. What was involved in this incident? Some maintain that private, others that public, confession was abolished by Nectarius' decree. If we turn to the Greek, we find that the scandal which provoked the interference of the bishop arose from a public confession made apparently just before the Eucharist. As the Penitentiary Priest was evidently held responsible for the occurrence, it must

have been owing to his advice that the confession was made at all. May we not fairly conclude from the story, that the injunctions of the Penitentiary Priest had by this time become invested with such authority, that they were carried out with scrupulous obedience, even when, as in the case before us, they would naturally run counter to the inclinations of the penitent, and the general wishes of the Christian community? A public confession of immoral relations with an ecclesiastic was at this time so unexpected, so utterly distasteful to popular sentiment, that the whole Church, clergy and laity alike, were filled with dismay and indignation. Nectarius resolved to avoid the possibility of such an occurrence in the future. He abolished the Penitentiary's office altogether, and so left it entirely to the conscience of each individual to determine whether or not he should share in the Eucharist, "for this was the only way to preserve the Church from such scandal."

The drift, then, of all this seems to be that Nectarius did away with any open confession of sins before the Eucharist. He removed once for all the control formerly exercised over penitents by a recognised official, and always liable to be abused by an injudicious Penitentiary, who, not content with hearing a private confession and offering spiritual comfort, might insist on a public avowal also.

The above is, I think, the only explanation adequate to the facts. Protestant controversialists allege that Nectarius abolished private confession, Roman writers find in the story a determination on the part of the bishop to get rid of public confession. The true theory would seem to lie halfway between these two views. Nectarius cannot possibly have caused the disappearance of private confession, for, apart from other reasons, the practice is fully recognised in the early Greek penitentials of the next century. Nor on the other hand was public confession completely eradicated, for notorious sins were still openly acknowledged in

the East as well as the West for some time after Nectarius' death. What the Patriarch did was to prevent the public confession of secret offences being insisted upon by a recognised official, whose orders were to all intents and purposes obligatory. For the future, after auricular confession, a Christian could determine on his own responsibility whether or not he was fit to approach the altar. The public confession of secret sins had, in fact, by Nectarius' time become almost obsolete and was *ἐγγὺς ἀφανισμοῦ*. Unless this were so, it is difficult to explain two facts,—first, the excitement and disturbance aroused by its occurrence on this occasion; secondly, the readiness with which the example of Constantinople was followed by the other Eastern sees. Socrates, however, did not regard this new arrangement with satisfaction: *ὁρῶ δὲ ὅτι πρόφασιν πάρεσχε τοῦ μὴ ἐλέγχειν ἀλλήλων τὰ ἁμαρτήματα μηδὲ φυλάττειν τὸ τοῦ ἀποστόλου παράγγελμα τὸ λέγον, Μηδὲ συγκοινωνεῖτε τοῖς ἔργοις τοῖς ἀκάρποις τοῦ σκότους, μᾶλλον δὲ καὶ ἐλέγχετε.* This passage cannot refer to private confession, but to the fact that now by the removal of any obligation to public confession before communion, no discrimination in the admission of Christians could any longer be exercised, and "unfruitful works of darkness" might be actually present at the Eucharist, undetected and unreproved by the other communicants.

The scantiness of our information as to auricular confession in the primitive Church, seems due to the fact that this was then regarded as one of the ordinary functions of the priesthood. All early writers who touch on the subject do so in quite a casual manner, and show no sign that they regard it as anything abnormal or unusual. Every Protestant author whom I have consulted, maintains that the celebrated Epistle of Leo to the Campanian bishops effected a violent breach in the ancient system of confession. Yet the general tone of the letter does not suggest anything of

the kind, nor does a single ecclesiastical writer of the time (as far as I know) pass any adverse comment upon the Pope's action. If innovation there was, it would seem to have been on the side of the clergy censured by Leo. These persons had, "contrary to the apostolic rule," presumed to recite from a *libellum*, in the face of the congregation, the sins of which penitents had been guilty. Leo orders the abolition of so ill-advised a practice—"*removeatur tam improbabilis consuetudo*,"—inasmuch as it tended greatly to discourage penitence by insisting on a public declaration of sins, "since it is enough that the guilt of men's consciences should be laid open to the priests alone in private confession." It is not easy to see what the Pope means exactly by "contrary to the apostolic rule." Does he wish to disparage this half-mechanical recitation of sins by another person from a written record, which had usurped the place of that personal and spontaneous confession recommended by St. James?

It is of course true that in prohibiting the public acknowledgment of secret sins Leo was departing from a usage which had prevailed to some extent in the days of Irenæus and even Origen. But the practice, it would seem, had never become at all universal even at the earlier period, and had apparently fallen into disuse by the time of Augustine.[1] Leo's object was to remind the clergy of Campania that their adaptation of a practice prevalent in earlier ages was an innovation upon the usages of the contemporary Church, from which the public confession of all but notorious sins had practically disappeared, though public *penance* still continued. The letter illustrates the view of confession current in Leo's time, but can scarcely be said to have itself originated any alteration. So violent a change as

[1] In one of his sermons, St. Augustine points to certain persons who are doing penance for heinous sins, the details of which are quite unknown to the congregation.

that usually alleged could not be effected by a single rescript addressed to a few Italian bishops, and dealing with a case of merely local interest. The sins recited from the *libellum* were apparently those which, whether trivial or heinous, were known to the offender and the priest alone. That Leo is not prohibiting the public acknowledgment of open and notorious sins, seems evident from the fact that public penance for this class of offences still continued in both the East and West, although more and more difficulty was experienced in enforcing it.

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NOTE ON THE MEANING OF THE WORD ΑΙΩΝΙΟΣ.

SOME time ago some papers appeared in the EXPOSITOR, from the pen of Dr. Agar Beet, "On the Future Punishment of Sin." He carefully examined the meaning of the word *αἰώνιος*; and I believe I am right in saying that the only passage adduced by him in which the word apparently meant "endless" was Plato, *Laws*, 904A. But does not the word here mean rather "perpetual" or "abiding"? Does not Plato say that the "animal soul" and the "body" are indestructible, but not perpetual or abiding (*αἰώνιον*)? They are always undergoing a process of dissolution and reconstruction. They have, as we should say, no "individuality." On the other hand, they are indestructible, because, if either of the two were destroyed, living creatures could no longer be generated. They are described as *τὸ γενομένον*, whereas the rational soul belongs to a different category of things. It is not transmitted in generation, but is drawn from the great "treasury of souls" by the Author of all things.

Similarly in Aristotle *ἀΐδιος* is used as the contradictory