

## THE CHURCH OF IRELAND AND THE CONFESSIONAL Edward Darling

*The following article is an updated version of one originally written by **Bishop Edward Darling** for the February 1974 edition of the parish magazine of St. John's, Malone where he was then Rector.*

Often in the course of my ministry I heard the opinion expressed which regrets the fact that the Church of Ireland does not make use of the confessional. Equally often I heard the opposite view from members of our own church which condemns the practice of private confession before a priest. The people who hold this latter view regard the confessional as a 'Roman' innovation, and add that "we in the Church of Ireland don't go to Confession". Perhaps it is true that in practice we don't, generally speaking, but we must try to understand what is the official teaching of the Church of Ireland on the matter. For both these views – the one which advocates the use of the confessional and the other which condemns it – spring from a certain amount of ignorance as to where the Church of Ireland stands in this respect. And the blame for this ignorance must be laid fairly and squarely on the shoulders of the clergy, myself included, for so often failing to give more direct teaching on the subject, hence the reason for writing this article.

### *The Official Position*

How does the Church of Ireland look upon the practice of what is known as 'auricular confession' – in other words, confession in the presence of an ordained minister? That is the question before us.

Generally speaking, whenever we want to find out where exactly we stand on many aspects of our faith, we often turn to *The Book of Common Prayer*, which we believe to be scriptural, and which has been given to us as a result of the Reformation. So let us turn to it in this instance also.

In the first of the three exhortations which are printed following the 2004 revision of Holy Communion One (p. 198) are the following words: "And because it is requisite, that no man should come to the Holy Communion, but with a full trust in God's mercy, and with a quiet conscience; therefore if there be any of you, who by this means cannot quiet his own conscience herein, but requireth further comfort or council, let him come to me, or to some other discreet and learned minister of God's word, and open his grief; that by the ministry of God's holy Word, he may receive the benefit of absolution, together with spiritual council and advice, to the quieting of his conscience, and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness." These words are repeated verbatim from the 1878 edition of *The Book of Common Prayer* in the Church of Ireland, which means, of course, that there has been no change in the position held since then.

In the 1967 interim revision of the Holy Communion (p.23 White Booklet edition): "If any of you cannot quiet his own conscience, but requires further assurance of advice, let him come to me, or some other discreet Minister of God's Word, and tell his sin, so that by the ministry of God's holy Word he may receive the benefit of absolution."

Consider again what one of the rubrics (that is a direction or instruction) says in the service of the Visitation of the Sick in our 1926 BCP: "Here if the sick person feels his conscience troubled with any weighty matter, he shall be moved to open his grief." The same kind of recommendation is made in the third of the notes preceding the 'Ministry to those who are Sick' in the 2004 BCP: "Those with a troubled conscience who may require spiritual guidance and counsel should consult the minister and seek the benefit of absolution through the ministry of God's holy Word."

### ***Not overstressed***

Here, then, are a few examples of auricular confession before a priest laid down in *The Book of Common Prayer*, a few examples only, however, which suggest that the Church of Ireland welcomes the idea of private confession but doesn't overstress it, so that anybody who feels unhappy about the confessional is not compelled to use it. But the opportunities are there for those who wish to partake of it, and that is something that members of the Church of Ireland are not always aware of.

It may be interesting at this point to note what one of the Canons (rules) of the Church of Ireland said just before Disestablishment in 1870. The Canon ordered the minister to cause a bell to be tolled or to give some other warning "the afternoon before the administration of the Lord's Supper.....that if any have scruple or conscience, or desire the special ministry of reconciliation, he may afford it to those that need it."

### ***Protestant in character***

Confession of one's sins to God, then, in the presence of a priest is no innovation of the Roman Catholic tradition. Indeed it is a practice which could hardly be more Protestant in character. Many of the most famous of the great Reformers and Protestants are those who have frequently advocated the use of private confession, and have resorted to it themselves.

Martin Luther, for instance, whose name needs no introduction, urged the practice of it very strongly – 'our dear confession' as he called it. And this is what he wrote: "If a poor beggar heard that in a certain place were being distributed rich alms of money and clothing, would he need to be taken there by a policeman?.... If you are poor and in misery, go and confess, and use this means to health..... If, however, you despise this treasure, and if you are too proud to confess your sins, we conclude that you are no Christian and that neither are you to share in the Lord's Supper. You despise what no Christian ought to despise, and therefore you cannot obtain remission of sins, and from that we see that you despise the gospel." They are Luther's words and strong words they are.

Another great Protestant, John Calvin, who we might say was close to being a Presbyterian, was no less definite, and this is what he says: "Let every believer, if he feels such perplexity of conscience that he cannot do without the help of another,

consider that he ought not to neglect the remedy offered him by God; which is, in order to alleviate distress and deliver him from scruple, he should confess privately to his pastor.....Ministers are constituted by God witnesses and as it were sureties, to certify our conscience of the remission of sins and to loose souls. When we find this attributed to them, let us consider it is for our benefit."

And to this day, pastors of the reformed church at their ordination undertake to keep secret those confessions which may be made to them for the quieting of conscience. Their position then is similar to what ours has been in the Anglican Communion: prior to the introduction of our present 2004 BCP, when a bishop laid his hands upon the head of the person being ordained priest within Church of Ireland or Church of England, he said these scriptural words: "Receive the Holy Ghost for the Office and Work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained." In the new 2004 revised Ordinal the Bishop says to the candidate priests: "Priests (or presbyters) in the Church of God ... are to proclaim the Word of the Lord, to call those who hear to repentance, and in Christ's name to pronounce absolution and declare the forgiveness of sins."

#### ***Views of even others***

Another ardent Protestant, John Wesley, made the following remarks: "We grant that confession before others can in several respects be healthy – public confession in places where a person has caused public scandal; private to a spiritual guide when otherwise desiring to remove that which is of any weight on the conscience." He emphasises that it must be voluntary and not compulsory.

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (who we might say compiled the first *Book of Common Prayer* in English) and Bishop Hugh Latimer, two of the great reformers, in sermon after sermon preached and exhorted people to come to confession.

Much more recently, a leading American evangelist, who was a Baptist pastor – Dr Harry Emerson Fosdick of New York (1878-1969) – while addressing a meeting of clergy, recommended the institution of a Protestant Confessional. His concluding words were: "A good priest can, in the confessional, help individuals in a manner which we have nothing corresponding to. In spite of the fact that I am a Baptist, I have had myself for six years what I should like to call a confessional."

Again, you may remember how a number of years ago the Scottish Presbyterian, Dr. George MacLeod (1895-1991) – founder and leader of the Iona Community – came to Belfast and, during his visit here, advocated a plea for a return to auricular confession. The result of his plea, needless to say, was a lengthy controversy in the correspondence columns of the local press!

#### ***How we may sum it up***

And so you see, private confession is far from being a Roman invention. It has been practised and still is being practised by Christians of all denominations. And the one point which Protestants make, differing from the earlier position of the Church of Rome, is that the use of private confession is a voluntary thing. Perhaps we can sum up our position by stating: "All may, some should, none must use the confessional."

### ***A definite need for the Confessional***

Now there are many who feel that there is absolutely no need for this private confession. Some of us maintain that we can confess our sins to God without ever having to go near a priest. This may well be so; but some people feel, on the other hand, the very fact that they talk their trouble over, in the knowledge that sympathetic advice can be given and that what has been disclosed cannot be talked about again to anybody – the seal of the confessional – helps them no end. It is, after all, an easy thing to get down on one's knees at a bedside and confess openly to God. It is not such an easy thing, however, to confess to God in the presence of a priest, especially if that priest knows the penitent well. Some people never go to see a doctor. They are quite healthy and they don't need to. But nevertheless, we often hear of people who, though feeling quite well, have to go to a doctor for what we call a 'check-up'. As we said, they feel all right, they keep their bodies clean, they take plenty of exercise, they feed with the proper diet, but, in spite of all this, they *must* go for their 'check-up'.

### ***Open to all***

And so you may or may not agree with the practice of auricular confession. The purpose of this article is not necessarily that you should accept it but that you may be aware of the fact that the Church of Ireland affords the opportunities of the use of the confessional to those who desire it, and that constantly day after day, through this ministry, men and women are making their peace with God. In my own personal life I can honestly claim that I have always found the confessional to be a tremendous spur towards spiritual discipline.

One thing of which we can be quite sure is that those who go to their priest to discuss their shortcomings and are truly repentant are not only assured of God's forgiveness, but they also have the support and backing of their Church. The Church is there to help them and is sympathetic with them. And that is how the Church of Ireland looks upon the confessional, and, no doubt, that is what St. James had in mind when he wrote in his letter: "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed" (*James 5:16 NRSV*)