The Passion for Pardon.

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[The latest volume of the 'International Theological Library' has reached us somewhat late for formal review. So we have looked it through, been caught by it here and there, and quoted the following passage.

Its judgments we do not judge yet. Its reticence is not less surprising than its liberty of speech. Its style is the hand of a master.

Christian Institutions is the title. And that covers much. It covers three great departments of theology. Book I. deals with the Organization of the Church; Book II. with the Catholic Creeds and the Development of Doctrine; Book III. with Christian Worship. The author is Professor A. V. G. Allen, D.D.]

The conviction grew up in the popular mind that the Church was equal to the emergency of delivering souls from purgatory. No ecclesiastical council formulated the principle. It was the mind of Europe, the imagination of a whole people, investing the Church with all Divine prerogatives. It began to take form at the moment when the Church was winning her victories over emperors and princes, when Innocent the Great asserted he authority of the papacy in every country in Europe. The Church could not but accept the honour and the power with which she was being clothed anew, adding to her dominion on earth the dominion over heaven. The theological principle by which the penalties of purgatory were to be overcome was set forth by Thomas Aquinas, and it reflects the inmost life of the Middle Ages,—the principle of solidarity in its final culmination or apotheosis. The members of the Church constituted a great whole. They were members of Christ, and therefore of one another; it was therefore possible that the merits of one might be transferred to another, and the deficiencies of some be made good by the redundant virtues of their favoured brethren. There were the saints, for example, who had not only fulfilled the Church's requirements, but had by their life of painful self-abnegation created a superfluous accumulation of merit, for which there was no use, unless it could be brought into a general circulation, or deposited to the credit of those who had fallen into spiritual poverty or destitution. If this common treasure of human merit was not vast enough to stand the drain upon its resources when it was thrown open to all, it could be made to expand into infinite resources, because it was unfailingly supplied by the infinite merits of Christ. And this inexhaustible treasury was at the disposal of the Church, to be distributed at need, and according to her discretion. This whole story of indulgences reads like some fairy tale, as if humanity, instead of being spiritually poor and bankrupt, had suddenly become rich beyond the power of the imagination to measure, waking up to find itself the heir of Christ and of the saints. When we are tracing the origin of some of our most cherished convictions, the sacredness, the dignity, the grandeur, the nobility of human nature,—the conception of humanity as an ideal, worth labouring and suffering for, in the mind of some so glorious as to be a substitute for God, we must revert to this moment in the Middle Ages, when the enthusiasm for humanity, as it were, became the one controlling motive in life, and went beyond the bounds of moderation and discretion.

At the very moment when this exercise of indulgences was producing an unwonted excitement, at the beginning, that is, of the fourteenth century, Dante was writing his *Divine Comedy*. He was in downright opposition to the temper of the age, to the attitude of the Church. He met the fate of all those who try to stem the current of a popular conviction. He was showing men that punishments were not arbitrarily assigned by some external authority, but grew out of evil as its inevitable consequence, and the nature of the evil might be seen reflected in the misery which it created. Hell and purgatory and heaven corresponded to an inward condition of the soul. But the age did not heed the teaching of Dante, nor for centuries was that voice from the depth of the Middle Ages to command the audience of the world.

When a man, who has been poor, suddenly becomes rich, with a wealth allowing the full gratification of his whim or imagination, we are interested in noting whether he will stand the test, in what ways he will proceed to indulge his sense of power. Humanity in the Middle Ages was coming into the supposed possession of

spiritual wealth in an inexhaustible treasury, at the same moment when the wealth begotten of trade and commerce was transforming the world. The heavenly and the earthly treasures were placed in competition. The idea of a commutation in money payments, which had always been recognized in the ecclesiastical discipline, now revived with unwonted force. The wealth obtained by industry was turned over into heavenly securities. On the whole, we must admit that humanity behaved with credit to itself; that the vision, before it disappeared, leaving emptiness and bitterness in its stead, does reveal humanity as inclined to respond to ideal ends, as the highest, most characteristic aim of its existence. There was almost a spiritual panic, as men in their eagerness hastened to take possession of their spiritual treasury. There was, of course, a selfish desire to buy their own pardon, their own deliverance from purgatory, but the strongest motive, the most pathetic aspect of the whole business, was the desire to release their friends, their parents, their wives, their children, from the unknown world of human anguish and suffering.

One may note, in this curious phase of Mediæval religious experience, the common characteristic of all the phases of the deeper life of the Mediæval Church. The social aim predominates. The duties of life spring out of their solidarity as a race, duties to the Church, to the social order, or to one another. The highest expression of this social aim was seen when the sense of the bond uniting humanity on earth with humanity in the invisible world, led to one great effort to emancipate that part of the race which was suffering in purgatory. It was as though the Church on earth led another crusade for the object of recovering the human soul from the sepulchre of terrors in which it was entombed.

It is not necessary to touch upon the evil side of this subject of indulgences. Its history is familiar, and needs no fresh exposition. The whole system of ecclesiastical discipline was working badly in the age of the Renaissance. Instead of moral improvement, moral corruption seemed to be its outcome. For two hundred years there went on an increasing protest against the abuses it engendered. But it would be a mistake to think that the discipline had wrought only evil. It was very much with the penitential system of the Church as it was with the professions of the monastic life. The monks aimed at poverty, and inevitably grew rich; defeating their direct end, no doubt, but yet retaining the perfect ideal of man, as having a real existence apart from the fictitious surroundings of his life. The system of discipline had contributed to the social structure, grounding it in the principle of Christian solidarity. There was vastly more humanity in the Middle Ages, a kindlier relationship and sense of dependence among classes of society, than in the age which followed.

What, then, was the hidden cause of the abuses, the failures and corruptions, under which the world was labouring and complaining in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, before Luther appeared? It was not altogether that the Church had failed to accomplish its mission, but that, by accomplishing its mission, it had brought humanity to a point where the lack of some higher motive was felt than the Church could at once supply. It was the work of the German people to supply this motive; they became the bearer of what seemed like a new revelation, in reality the restoration of an older truth, for which, under the imperial régime of Latin Christianity, there had been no place or opportunity. The Germans were called to this task by a Divine Providence, so ordering their political history that, when other nations were on the eve of national independence and prosperity, for Germany there was reserved division, defeat, and humiliation. Germany had entered more deeply than any other country in Europe into the Mediæval ideal. Italy itself had not been so overcome by the presence in its midst of the spiritual head of the Church, as had Germany by the doctrine of the Holy Roman Empire. It was German emperors, not French or English kings, that had suffered the deepest humiliations at the hands of the papacy. From the time when the Empire lay prostrate, after the last representative of the Hohenstaufen dynasty had died ignominiously on the scaffold, Germany began to turn its attention to the interior life of the soul, in order to find in its inward experience the consolation which it needed. The characteristic movements in Germany in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are religious, when elsewhere they are political and secular. The most typical German man before Luther appeared was Eckhart, the mystic philosopher; the most typical book was

the *Imitation of Christ*, where it is no longer humanity offering consolation or pardon to itself, as in priestly absolution, but the voice of God is heard once more, speaking immediately, speaking in the first person, the 'I am,' in the depth of the soul. These were among the most direct precursors of Luther, to whom he owed most, from whom he borrowed most. Germany, more than any other country, had exploited the significance of ecclesiastical discipline. Indulgences had found their greatest demand in Germany, their sale had been prolonged there when it was unfruitful elsewhere. But discipline was just that feature of Mediæval Christianity, letting us down most deeply into the recesses of spiritual or human experience, the most inward process of the soul. It was concerned with the consciousness of evil, the need of repentance, the desire for pardon; in a word, purification, reconciliation, and everlasting peace. This was the absolute truth also for which Luther was seeking when he entered the monastery of Erfurt.

The highest aims of life are sometimes the unconscious ones. Luther had no other apparent object than to gain what the Church had to offer, the same sense of pardon and reconciliation for which the thousands who had preceded him had sought. He was exhausting in the convent cell the resources of the Church in ministering to the soul. The inward distress which he experienced, from which he could not escape, was the symbol of a vast and mighty revolution, whose purport he was long in realizing. Humanity, even in its fairest and purest attitude, could not bring relief. He had touched the weak spot in the whole method of Mediæval discipline and education. When, according to the theory, he ought to have been satisfied, he became more profoundly dissatisfied; when he had done all that could be done for reconciliation and pardon, he was further from its attainment than when he began his expiation. His soul was expanding on its Godward side, and the higher he stood, the larger grew the ideal and its obligations, till it seemed to assume infinite proportions. The duty towards man might be approximately felt or fulfilled, it was certainly definite and clear; but the duty toward God knew no limit to its range, to seek for its fulfilment was to forever enlarge its scope. In this emergency of the soul, there was no man that could help him, and even the Church had failed him. There is nothing like this, at once so awful and so sublime, in the history of Christian experience. It was the beginning of a new era—when one man came forth out of the heart of humanity, who was forced to stand alone, who could no longer rely on the solidarity of the race to save him, who, in his spiritual isolation, confronted the whole world, the Empire as well as the Church, who, when humanity failed him, threw himself upon God, and stood by the strength of a righteousness which was not his own, except in so far as his longing after it made it his own. Such is the principle of individual salvation, the doctrine of justification by faith.

Sermonettes on the Golden Texts.

By the Rev. R. C. Ford, M.A., Grimsby.

The Lord's Day.

'The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.'—Matt. xii. 8.

The second period of Christ's ministry may fitly be called the period of conflict. During the course of it every action of His only served to alienate the religious authorities more and more. His supposed breach of the Sabbath law was but one of a long series of offences with which He was charged. They also considered Him guilty of blasphemy, of consorting with wicked people, and of carelessness in regard to religious observances. They were daily expecting to find some new misdeed by which to accuse Him. They revealed their malice by the eagerness with which they brought the disciples' delinquencies to the notice of Him whom they esteemed responsible for them.

I. Christ's Classification of the Sabbath Law.—In defence, Christ urged the subordinate importance of the Sabbath law. It was part of the ceremonial law which must yield when it conflicts with higher laws. Ceremonial law said that the