

INTRODUCTION

AN introduction does not impose on its writer the editorial 'we', which I would have found more than usually embarrassing this month, as I want to indulge in some brief reminiscence. I have spoken from time to time recently for the Catholic Evidence Guild at the Bull Ring in Birmingham. I have been surprised to find (and my surprise will show the veterans what a greenhorn I am) that confession should still be regarded as one of the chief abuses of the Church of Rome. We are of course past the days of 'The Horrors of the Confessional Unmasked'—but only just. Confession is still an object of uneasy suspicion to the Non-conformist mind. 'It's a wicked religion, it's a wicked religion', one of my audience once persisted. Why? Because of confession. Catholics go to confession, one almost gathers, rather as car owners write off once a year to the County Council—to get their licences renewed. I think we could all ask ourselves how far our practice of this sacrament, superficial as it so often is, lends colour to this widespread mistrust of it as an arch-device of insincerity.

The most interesting objection I have had to confession is that it is inconsistent. When I pressed the objector to elucidate, it became clear that he meant it is inconsistent of us to sin again, our sins having once been blotted out in the blood of Christ, in which we were sacramentally washed at baptism. How right he was! And his feeling that there is no room for sin in the redeemed Church of Christ, *and therefore* no room for a second repentance and a second forgiveness (let alone a third, fourth, etc., *ad infinitum*), is one that has haunted the earnest believer from the earliest days of the Church, and haunted him sometimes into heresy and schism.

But the designs of God, blessed be he, allow for our human inconsistency. The three main articles that follow show us how this divine forbearance, and its sacramental expression, far from springing out of any underestimation of the sinfulness of sin, is on the contrary a consistent and key element in the strategy of the divine warfare against it.