



Confessional Chair

An extract re Bishop's Cannings from 'Column for the Curious'

A "Confessional Chair" in a Protestant church is one of the curiosities of the ecclesiology of Wiltshire, and was not passed over by the Archaeological Society of that county at their Congress held a few weeks since at Devizes. This relic of Roman Catholic times is preserved in the noble church of Bishops Cannings, which contains some of the most tasteful Early English architecture to be found in the county. At their recent visit the so-called sacristy, north of the chancel, was pronounced by the majority a chantry chapel, the sacristy in Roman Catholic churches being invariably placed south. This chamber possesses also a recessed credence table, separate priests' door, and its own belfry. The worthy Vicar and churchwardens courteously welcomed the archaeologists, who greatly admired the exquisite proportions, solid masonry, and stained glass of the church. The old chair stands in the transept; its purpose is an open question. Mr. Edward Waylen, of Lyecroft, calls it a "confessional chair," despite the grave authority of the late venerable Archdeacon of Wilts, who surmised it to be a "carrel;" "though," says Mr. Waylen, "the admonitory sentences on the painted hand at its back, and the attitude of the latter, plainly indicate the priestly act of conveying absolution to a penitent." "But," adds Mr. Waylen, "some will ask, how came a confessional to be retained in a Protestant church? The answer to which is supplied in the appointed offices of that church, which provide for the continued use of the tribunal of penance, as well as in the practice of many, both divines and laics, who, since the era of the Reformation, have resorted to it. Show me the statute or canon which abolished the Confessional in the Church of England."

Mr. Waylen thus describes the inscriptions on the chair:-

Sentences on the hand:- On the thumb and the attached scroll-"Thou knowest not how much; thou knowest not how many times - thou hast sinned."

On the fore finger - "Thy end is bitter; thy life is short; thou art born - with sin."

On the second finger - "Thou shalt take away with thee nothing but what thou hast done; Thou canst not lengthen thy life; Thou canst not escape thy death - Thou shalt die."

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On the third finger – “Thou knowest not where thou shalt go; thou knowest not how thou shalt die; Thou knowest not when thou shalt die – The hour of thy death is uncertain.”

On the fourth finger – “Thou shalt soon be forgotten by thy dear ones; Seldom will thy heir do anything for thee; Those to whom thou leavest thy goods will do little for thee – Thy state is miserable.

And on the large scroll under the fingers – “Thou shalt not be a man to others (non homo caeteris) if abundance flows to thee; Thou shalt not always be here; Remember that thou shalt die; Wealth shall vanish away; What thou hast here another shall have (quod habes hic alter habebit); Thy body shall rot; What thou doest shall remain with thee.”

Here we have the Manus Meditationis. That it could not be meant for a priest is evident. Priests held no property except in trust, nor had heirs. Other things in its construction support the obvious conclusion to my mind that the Cannings folks possess one of the veritable confessionals at which their Catholic forefathers shrived.

There was at the meeting some demur as to Mr. Waylen's conclusions, by the Rev. Mr. Baron, on the grounds that the position of the pointed hand differed from that of a priest in the act of pronouncing absolution, which, the rev. Gentleman said, was with two fingers only extended. Mr. Waylen replied that that position of the hand accompanied the act of priestly blessing; but not when he makes the sign of the cross in consecrating the Host, &c., and absolving penitents. The only difficulty lies in the absence of a grating on the right side of the chair; but there might have been one originally and the present wooden panel inserted in its place; or, had there not been a grating, the door, being on that side, could have opened when a penitent approached for the performance of his duty. However, the opinions of the archaeologists at their late meeting upon the chair seemed to be evenly balanced.

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