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**An Irenic Theologian: William Forbes, First  
Bishop of Edinburgh**

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***Joyce B Martin***

At the end of the short *Life of William Forbes*, written by his friend Thomas Sydserf (1581-1663), Sydserf predicts that no passage of time will erase or obliterate the memory of Forbes. In this he has proved to be right since references to Forbes appear in a number of books. Nonetheless, he remains one of the least well known of the Caroline divines. This is probably because he was Scottish - and so most of his comparatively short life was spent north of the border - and also because so little of his writing has survived. Indeed we have only one work of his, which we owe to a MS which he entrusted to Thomas Sydserf with the injunction to 'macke any use of it that he pleased'. The troubles of the times meant that Sydserf did not see it through the press until 1658, more than 20 years after Forbes's death. It was in Latin, with a somewhat cumbersome title which can be translated as *Temperate and Peace-making Reflections on the Controversies regarding Justification, Purgatory, the Invocation of Saints, Christ the Mediator and the Eucharist*. (I shall refer to it by the first word of its Latin title - *Considerationes*).

The fewness of the editions which followed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries suggest that there was no great interest in the book. However, between 1850-1856, almost certainly under the impulse provided by the Oxford Movement, the Scottish Episcopalian, cleric and patristic scholar, George Hay Forbes, (1821-1875) produced a new edition. This had

the Latin text side by side with an English translation, so necessitating a two volume work.

The *Considerationes* is virtually the sole source for Forbes's irenical ideas. Even the most cursory glance at it reveals one important fact about him - his immense learning. He was master of the three sacred languages, Latin, Greek and Hebrew; and his command of Hebrew was such that he was offered the Chair of Hebrew here in Oxford - and at, 'a generous stipend', too - but his precarious health made it impossible for him to accept. His knowledge of Scripture, the Fathers, the medieval schoolmen and contemporary theologians, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, was prodigious. His book abounds in quotations from them all; and Hay Forbes, who tells us he checked the great majority of the references, remarks somewhat ruefully that he found it extremely laborious.

William Forbes was born in Aberdeen in 1585, He was a citizen of no mean city. Aberdeen, with its two universities, King's College and Marischal College, was the centre of the intellectual life of north-eastern Scotland. The late Professor Donaldson points out, with undisguised satisfaction, that Aberdeen had as many universities as existed in the whole of England.

Forbes was educated at Aberdeen Grammar School and Marischal College where, after graduation, he taught for four years before setting off on the seventeenth century equivalent of the Grand Tour. That is, he travelled to a number of continental Protestant universities - Helmstedt, Heidelberg, Leiden - where he worked assiduously in the libraries, adding to his theological knowledge of the Fathers and the schoolmen. Helmstedt had a reputation for its, 'tolerant and irenical spirit', but much more important in this respect was Leiden. The Dutch university was not only served by scholars of the stature of Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540-1609), but in Gerhard Vossius (1577-1649) and Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) it had men both immensely learned and deeply interested in irenicism and the search for solutions to the religious divisions of the day. With such scholars Forbes formed friendships and took part in discussions which may well have had an important influence on him at a formative time in his life.

He returned to Scotland in about 1610, and a year later he was ordained into the ministry of the Scottish Kirk. He served in that ministry for the rest of his life, principally as a parish minister, both in the diocese of Aberdeen and in Edinburgh. At the very end of his life, Charles I created the diocese of Edinburgh and made William Forbes its first Bishop, an appointment he held for only two and a half months before his death in 1634 at the age of 49. In addition to his work in the Kirk he also taught theology at Marischal College, becoming Dean of the Faculty of Theology and briefly, Principal. It is possible that the origins of the *Considerationes* can be traced to lectures he gave to his theology students at Marischal, although the bulk of the work belongs to later years.

The purpose of the *Considerationes* is to suggest ways in which reconciliation, or at least a lessening of animosity, may be brought about between Roman Catholics and Protestants, and between Protestants themselves, on a number of particularly contentious issues. At the beginning of the book, Forbes launches straight into a debate which was close to the heart of the Reformation - the doctrine of Justification, i.e. the doctrine which explains how we are saved. To this he devotes more space than to any other subject. In the Hay Forbes edition it occupies the whole of volume one in that two volume work. Despite the ferocity of the arguments surrounding this particular doctrine, Forbes declared - to the discomfiture, not to say bewilderment of some of his Scottish parishioners - that, 'We may be reconciled [with the papists] especially in the head of Justification'. He discusses the ramifications of the doctrine in very great detail and often in a way entirely alien to the modern mind. For this reason, and because of the constraints of time and the need not to presume too much upon your forbearance, I have chosen only a few examples of Forbes's irenic methods as they relate to the disputes over Justification. However, the same methods, along with others, are frequently used in his discussion of all the controversies with which he deals.

A method which he uses frequently, both in regard to Justification and elsewhere, is to expose and correct the misunderstandings - these sometimes amounted to deliberate misrepresentations - which each side entertained about the beliefs of their opponents. Concerning Justification, he quotes a statement of Cardinal Bellarmine to

the effect that Protestants believe, 'that faith without works suffices for salvation'. Forbes hastens to explain that this is quite untrue because, when Protestants refer to faith alone as being necessary for Justification, they mean a 'living' faith, that is, one joined to love and good works, or at least to the intention of performing such works. Furthermore, he says that all, 'the more learned Protestants', accept that Scripture nowhere expressly says that faith alone justifies and that, in the cause of peace, 'very many' Protestants are now willing to abandon the word 'alone' altogether and to stress the necessity of good works for the salvation of adults. For good measure, he also points out that, notwithstanding what Bellarmine has said, Thomas Stapleton (1535-1598), a learned English Roman Catholic and a 'vehement adversary' of Protestantism, agrees that Protestants do indeed have the understanding of 'faith' which Forbes has described.

While Forbes is thus at pains to reassure Roman Catholics that Protestants have not simply discarded good works in their thinking about Justification, he is equally anxious to reassure Protestants that Romans place a high value on faith and are therefore misrepresented as believing in 'works righteousness'. Here he is able to quote from a pronouncement of the Council of Trent, which says, 'We are said to be justified *gratis*, because none of the things which precede justification, neither faith nor works, merit the grace of justification'. Trent also spoke of faith as 'the beginning . . . the foundation and root of all justification'. Cardinal Francisco de Toledo (1532-1596), the first Jesuit cardinal, is also quoted as stressing the importance of faith when he wrote that, 'it is more evident in faith, that a man is justified not by his own virtue but by the merit of Christ . . . on Whom believing they are saved, and not by any virtue or merit of their own . . .'

It is always part of Forbes's strategy to point out matters on which there is agreement between Roman Catholics and Protestants and both these words of the Council of Trent and those of Cardinal de Toledo demonstrate that such agreement does exist. This in itself was important at a time when many on both sides would have denied the possibility of any such meeting of minds on this issue.

Similarly, Forbes explains that many Roman Catholics accept that in Scripture the phrase, 'to be justified', often carries the meaning, 'to be pronounced or declared just' - an understanding of the word 'justified' which Protestants always stressed, but that, equally, many learned Protestants accept that it sometimes means, 'to be imbued or gifted with justice', an understanding of the phrase preferred by Roman Catholics.

Forbes is also at pains to show that some questions which are thought to be matters of dispute are no such thing, the supposed dispute being entirely imaginary. For example, the question whether any Christians, even the saints, are able to keep God's law in all its strictness during their earthly lives. Roman Catholics, while making an exception for the Virgin Mary, have replied that such perfection is impossible, and therefore when they fail to achieve it they do not regard this as a sin. Protestants agree that it cannot be achieved but when they fail to achieve it, they do regard it as a sin but believe that God, for Christ's sake, does not impute it to them. Forbes ends this curious debate with the words of Marc Antonio de Dominis (?1560-1624), sometime Archbishop of Spalatro (Split), who says that, 'In the thing itself . . . we agree, for it is the same benefit to me, if any action in me be not a sin at all, and if it be a sin, but be not imputed'. In other words, he agrees with Forbes that the dispute is imaginary.

Closely related to Justification is the question of how certain a believer can be that he is indeed justified in God's sight. This is the vexed question of assurance, a matter of acute concern to very many Protestants. Some of them held that believers could, and indeed ought, to have an absolute certainty about this matter, that is, a certainty without the possibility of error. Luther had complained that Roman teaching on this issue left Christians, 'to wander and fluctuate, uncertain and doubtful about the forgiveness of sins and our being in a state of grace and salvation'. This alone was considered by Luther to be sufficient to warrant separation from the Roman Church. Similarly, the well-known Calvinist theologian, William Perkins (1558-1602), claimed that a Papist's religion teaches that, 'a man must doubt of his salvation'. However, belief in the possibility of such absolute certainty on this matter was condemned at Trent, where it was said that such certainty could only be the result of a special revelation from God. This may look like a total impasse, but Forbes is not

daunted and points out that Roman teaching makes provision for other kinds of certainty than that without possibility of error. For instance, Christians can have a 'conjectural or probable certainty' about their justification and this is enough 'to banish all anxiety and hesitation' and 'utter fluctuation of the mind'; while for those well advanced in the spiritual life there is a yet stronger degree of certainty, moral certainty, which means that such souls no longer have any misgivings about their justification.

Forbes also points out that there are many Protestants who accept that the majority of believers do not have absolute certainty about their justification and that even those who believe they do have it find that the conviction is liable to fluctuate. In this way he at least shows how the gap between Roman Catholic and Protestant thinking on assurance can be narrowed and he quotes Francis White (?1564-1638), sometime Bishop of Norwich, who remarked regarding assurance of justification that the differences, 'between some learned Papists' and Protestants 'is very small (if it be any at all)'.

In the opinion of the present Principal of Wycliffe Hall, William Forbes's writing on Justification is 'the most important contribution of the Caroline divines' to the discussion of the subject, but I must now leave you to peruse the volume for yourselves if you are anxious to know more. I cannot promise you what the BBC, with its habitual slovenliness, would probably describe as 'an easy read'!

Let us therefore go on to consider how Forbes seeks to reconcile opposing views on the other matters he discusses in the *Considerationes*.

With regard to all the remaining issues of Purgatory, prayers for the dead, the invocation of angels and saints and the Eucharist, Forbes does his utmost to convince Protestants who have rejected Roman Catholic doctrine on such matters, that these doctrines do not deserve to be regarded with such abhorrence as they often are. He tries to show how they may be made more acceptable to Protestants. This serves his irenic purpose of seeking to close the gap between opposing sides.

He makes two proposals which he believes would reduce the extent of disagreement and which are both very important elements in the programme common to all the irenicists of the time. First, he calls for only the fundamentals of the Christian faith to be required to be believed *de fide*. Outside this central core variety of opinion should be allowed on a range of matters of lesser importance; these were known as *adiaphora* or, 'things indifferent'. Secondly, he urges that the authorities recognised as definitive by all Christians should be: Scripture - the teachings of the early Fathers - the pronouncements of General Councils - and practices of the Church in the first five centuries of its existence.

We find these principles influencing his thinking in what he has to say about Purgatory, a doctrine rejected by the vast majority of Protestants at the Reformation. Much of the acrimony could be taken out of the argument if Rome ceased to require the doctrine to be believed *de fide* and consigned it instead to the category of 'things indifferent'. Forbes also suggests that an, 'intermediate state', after death, something which he himself thought was 'by no means devoid of a considerable degree of probability', would be acceptable to many Protestants if it could be divorced from some current Roman ideas about a punitive Purgatory - if you wish to catch the flavour of some of these, look at *The Stripping of the Altars* by the Roman Catholic historian, Eamon Duffy. It was also Forbes's conviction that the idea of a punitive Purgatory was without warrant either in Scripture or the teachings of the early Fathers - two of the authorities which he believed should be definitive for the Church. Some very different ideas about an intermediate state can be found in the Fathers and he quotes a number of them, who write of the, 'sweet consolation', enjoyed by God's departed servants. He also quotes more recent Roman Catholic theologians whose ideas on the intermediate state are in strong contrast to some of those believed by Protestants to represent Roman thinking. So the Dutch theologian, Wessel Gansford (c.1420-1489), understood the purgation of the dead to consist in their growth in love, not in their endurance of punishment. 'Such affliction as there is', wrote Gansford, 'arises from an increasing desire to love, along with an awareness of not yet loving 'worthily'. This is not pain, but godly grieving'. Forbes's conclusion is plain: if Rome would cease to demand *de fide* belief and modify its teaching on the nature of an intermediate state as primarily

punitive, the idea of Purgatory (though perhaps not under that name) might become either acceptable, or at least, a good deal less repugnant, to Protestants.

On prayers for the dead, a practice closely associated with belief in Purgatory and therefore also largely rejected at the Reformation, Forbes, who very much approved the practice, seeks to detach it from the idea of a punitive Purgatory, pointing out that the notion that such prayers deliver souls from the torments of Purgatory did not appear until the fifth century. Once again he proposes an alternative to this current view of the purpose of such prayers. He quotes the opinion of the irenical Roman Catholic lay theologian, Georg Cassander (1513-1566), that such prayers are 'acceptable to God and useful to the Church as a testimony of love towards the departed and as a profession of faith in the immortality of the soul . . .' He draws attention to the opinion of the Greeks and of some Latins that there is an intermediate state without torments, where the redeemed 'perfect themselves in the love of God by fervent and longing sighs'. Such an understanding of an intermediate state would make prayer for the dead much more likely to commend itself to Protestants and, in any case, since such prayers have not been deemed by Rome to be absolutely necessary, there is no reason why moderate men should dispute about them. Forbes himself approves of such prayer as a very ancient usage of the Church and therefore not lightly to be abandoned but rather used both in public and in private as a thing, 'lawful & useful', and one sanctioned 'by holy antiquity', on whose practice he calls on the 'Christian commonwealth' to re-model itself.

Concerning the Intercession/Invocation of angels and saints, Forbes is at pains to try to convince Protestants that such intercession/invocation is not propitiatory - i.e. it does not derogate from Christ's role as our sole Mediator, nor does it involve the offering of worship to angels or saints. He also reminds Protestants that, as with prayers for the dead, these practices have not been pronounced *de fide* by Rome. He explains that the Fathers who invoked the saints did so not as propitiatory mediators with God, but because they believed that in heaven the saints were, 'endued with greater love than formerly', and so were able to 'pray for us much more ardently than ever before', but always, 'through the only Mediator and Propitiator,



Christ'. Forbes is able to cite a number of Protestants who are not wholly opposed to the practice, as long as no worship is offered to the saints. Instead of condemning the use of such prayers, Protestants should direct criticism to their abuse and he recalls the complaint of Erasmus that sometimes Roman Catholics were encouraged to believe the saints were 'more easy to be entreated than God and Christ'. It is Forbes's hope that, if such abuses are removed, this very ancient custom of the Church in both East and West need not be abandoned and peace can be made on this issue between the opposing parties.

Forbes's final discussion deals with what he describes as the 'Very serious' controversy about the Eucharist. All Protestants were at odds with Rome over the doctrine of transubstantiation (pronounced *de fide* in 1215) and were also at odds with one another about what was the proper teaching on the nature of the Sacrament. In Forbes's thinking on this matter you will find marked resemblances to that of the English Caroline divines, particularly Lancelot Andrewes, whom Forbes praised for his great learning and described as, 'a man worthy of all credit'. Forbes makes the same distinction as Andrewes between the reality of Christ's presence in the Sacrament and the manner of it. For both of them the doctrine of transubstantiation concerns only the manner of the presence and hence belongs to the category of *adiaphora*. Therefore, Forbes insists, like Andrewes, that it is possible to believe that Christ is really present in the Eucharist without being committed to transubstantiation. As part of his irenic endeavour to reduce disagreements and remove misconceptions, Forbes is anxious to convince Roman Catholics that many Protestants have not abandoned belief in the real presence but only differ from them on the question of how it is brought about. Similarly, he wishes Protestants to understand that the rejection of transubstantiation does not necessarily entail the rejection of belief that Christ is truly present in the Sacrament.

Forbes points to the lack of scriptural warrant for transubstantiation and says the doctrine was unknown to the early Church, whose understanding of the matter was that expressed by St. Bernard when he said that Christ's flesh 'is exhibited to us, but spiritually, not carnally'. However, by 'spiritually' Forbes

does not mean, as some Protestants mean, that the Body of Christ is received 'by bare faith'. He quotes from Calvin's writing on the Supper, where the Reformer says, '. . . The bread is not a bare and simple figure, but one joined to that which is its reality and substance . . . Deservedly is the bread called the Body, since it not only represents it to us, but also offers it . . .'

In the opinion of de Dominis this explanation of Calvin's was sufficient to bring about peace between the parties. Forbes also explains that the reason for the stress on the spiritual nature of the presence is, partly at least, a reaction against some accounts of Christ's presence in the Sacrament which have been far too gross and material.

True to the irenic spirit of his writing, Forbes seeks to persuade Roman Catholics not to condemn as heretical those Protestants who believe that after the consecration, the substance of bread and wine remains along with the Body and Blood of Christ. He quotes Peter of Alliaco (1350-1429), a Franciscan theologian who was a professor at the Sorbonne, Archbishop of Cambrai and a cardinal who said, 'it is not contrary either to reason or to the authority of holy scripture . . . to believe this'. Forbes is also able to draw on the words of Cuthbert Tunstal (1474-1559), intermittently Bishop of Durham in the sixteenth century, who declared that before 1215, it was left for Christians freely to decide on how they thought the presence was brought about, as long as they 'owned the truth of the Body & Blood of the Lord in the Eucharist, which was the very faith of the Church from the beginning'. Forbes also repeats the opinion of the Cardinal of Lorraine at the Colloquy of Poissy in 1561, to the effect that there was no reason why transubstantiation should be a cause of division among Christians. Here again we have some very good examples of the use Forbes makes of quotations which suggest the contending parties are not so far apart as many of them imagine.

Characteristically, having called on Roman Catholics not to accuse Protestants of being heretics because of their Eucharistic beliefs, he calls on Protestants not to accuse Roman Catholics and Lutherans of being 'heretical, impious and blasphemous', on account of their Eucharistic beliefs. Remarking that transubstantiation is believed by Roman Catholics and many of the Greek Orthodox,

Forbes warns that, 'it would be an act of great rashness and temerity to condemn as guilty of heresy or deadly error all these followers of Christian religion'.

On the question of the reservation of the Sacrament, Forbes recommends that contention be ended by returning to the ancient practice of the Church when reservation was for the purpose of taking the Sacrament to the sick, not for the purpose of being carried about in processions.

The adoration of the Sacrament caused acute disagreement and bitter animosity towards Rome among many Protestants, not least in Forbes's native Scotland, where many regarded even the simple act of kneeling to receive Communion as idolatrous because it was taken to imply such adoration. Once again Forbes seeks to remove the bitterness from this particular dispute by showing it is based on a misunderstanding. Adoration is not being offered to the bread and wine but to Christ present in the Sacrament, therefore it is grossly mistaken and offensive for Protestants to accuse Roman Catholics of being 'bread worshippers', or having a 'breden God'. Since the Greek Orthodox as well as the Roman Catholics 'adore Christ in the Sacrament', Forbes asks, 'who shall dare to excommunicate and condemn all these Christians as guilty of idolatry?'

On whether the Mass is a sacrifice, Forbes is again at pains to correct the mistaken idea that to describe the Eucharist in such a way implies belief in a repetition of the one sacrifice of Calvary. It is no such thing, but rather a representation of Christ's one sacrifice, as Roman Catholic theologians as eminent as Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas have taught. Nor is there any suggestion that the Mass can procure forgiveness of sins, only Calvary can do that, but the mass is a way of appropriating the propitiation made once for all on the Cross. Understood in this way and linked to Christ's perpetual intercession in heaven, there is no need to deny that the Eucharist is propitiatory and profitable both for the living and the dead.

Not the least important aspect of William Forbes's irenicism is his interest in the Greek Orthodox Church. He makes a number of references to their beliefs, especially in regard to the Eucharist. It may be that Forbes's stress on the role of the Holy Spirit in the Eucharistic action owes a good deal to his knowledge and

appreciation of the beliefs and liturgies of the Orthodox, whom he respected as representing an important strand in Christian thinking. There can be little doubt that he deplored the schism with the Christians of the East as much as he deplored the schism among the Christians of the West and would have rejoiced in the healing of both, if only it could have been achieved.

It is part of Forbes's irenical endeavour to urge all those who take part in controversy on religious issues to treat one another with courtesy and not to engage in the all too prevalent trading of insults. It was the common practice of a time when, according to one historian, 'public vituperation perhaps reached its apogee'. Even men of the learning and spiritual stature of Bishop Patrick Forbes of Aberdeen and his son Dr John Forbes engaged in it. So, to the Bishop, the pope was 'that verie Antichrist and man of sinne . . . a Wolfe and a Thiefe . . . even of al other the most execrable' and the Jesuits, (with apologies to this House!) were 'croating frogges'. For his part, John Forbes described transubstantiation as 'this monstrosity' and the Roman Mass as a 'sacrilegious mockery'.

This unedifying excursion into the invective of the time is necessary if we are to appreciate the contrast with William Forbes, whose *Considerationes*, while containing some very firmly stated criticisms of both Roman Catholics and Protestants, never uses the kind of language I have just quoted; in particular he never refers to the pope as Antichrist - an almost universal practice among Protestant writers. He invariably calls for moderation and courtesy in the course of theological arguments, since their opposites only increase animosity, not to say hatred, between the parties and retard progress toward the goal Forbes had so much at heart: reconciliation between the religious groups and the restoration of peace and unity in Western Christendom.

Despite all his labours in the *Considerationes*, all his explanations designed to correct misunderstandings and his pleas for moderation, charity and peace, William Forbes's voice, like that of so many other irenicists, went unheeded. In Scotland he was probably one of the most hated of the Episcopalian divines and, had he lived to witness the Presbyterian triumph of 1639, he would undoubtedly have shared

the fate of many of his fellow bishops and been deprived and excommunicated by the Scottish Kirk. Had this happened he might well have made his own the words of John Guthrie, Bishop of Moray, who wrote, 'I have laboured in vaine & have spent my strength in vain and for nothing . . .' However, in the longer perspective provided by nearly four hundred years, the judgement is rather different. Among contemporary theologians A.M. Allchin has commented on the importance of Forbes's 'pioneering work', which he hopes will be recognized more widely; and the present Bishop of Portsmouth, Dr Kenneth Stevenson, describes the *Considerationes* as 'one of the most unusual works of the seventeenth century', and one which has 'far more ecumenical potential . . . than has so far been appreciated'.