

Create in me a clean heart, O God.

The sacrifice of animals is insufficient, is not desired by God; it is the sinner's contrition and praise that is acceptable.



## PENANCE IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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**T**HE full significance of our Lord's 'Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God' (Matt. v, 8) is only to be understood in a setting of worship. Behind it is the thought of the psalm: 'Who shall ascend into the mountain of the Lord; or who shall stand in his holy place? The innocent in hands, and the clean of heart . . .' (Ps. xxiii, 3f). Man must become pure in his inmost being; and he must do so as a preparation for worship. But the man who conceives such desires discovers within himself impeding faults. These cause him grief; and the acknowledgment of being in such a state is to be penitent. Penitence as a prelude to the sacrifice of worship is the theme of Ps. 1: 'A sacrifice to God is an afflicted spirit; a contrite and humbled heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. . . . Then thou shalt accept the sacrifice of justice . . .' This relation between penance and worship is one of the most evident features of the place of penance in the practice of the early Church.

If the reasons recently put forward by Fr J.-P. Audet, O.P., for dating the *Didache* from between A.D. 50 and 70 and locating its origin in Antioch can be accepted, then its significance is extremely great. It links penance or confession with prayer several times. 'In the assembly, you shall confess your faults, and you will not enter into prayer with an evil conscience' (iv, 14). Whether the formulas used would be general, or whether there would be a spontaneous confession of each individual's sins, we do not know. As it is the last injunction of the 'Way of Life', it is unlikely to refer to 'mortal' sins. In the kind of eucharistic preface which it gives, there are these words: 'May he who is holy come; may he who is not do penance' (x, 6). Then, in a general rubric it

says: 'Each Lord's day, come together for the breaking of bread and the eucharist, after having confessed your sins so that you may be pure. But he who has a difference with his companions should not come to the assembly before being reconciled, so that your sacrifice does not suffer any stain' (xiv, 1-2). Here, stated in simple terms, is the place of penance in the early Church (indeed of the Church at any time): penance is necessary so that all may become holy; holiness is necessary for the purity of the sacrifice collectively offered, and the unity in holiness in offering that sacrifice is the cause of the corporate unity of the faithful.

We shall not be concerned with the penance which is necessary in receiving baptism and entering the Church, though that does provide the pattern for post-baptismal penance. Slight though the evidence from sub-apostolic times is, it is clear that penance was not only possible but necessary for post-baptismal faults. We know that by the third century there was a form of reconciliation of a penitent; but the historical evidence does not provide complete *historical* certainty that a form always existed. It does, however, seem to be most likely, and that the penitent was not just left to make his peace with God informally. A characteristic of the writers in the sub-apostolic Church is the clemency they show.

To cause divisions within the Church was a serious matter because of its corporate unity in holiness. Yet St Clement of Rome writes to the 'beginners of sedition and dissension' at Corinth in a mood of conciliation. 'Blessed are we if we perform the precepts of the Lord in the concord of charity, that by charity our sins may be forgiven us. . . . It is better for a man to confess faults than to harden his heart' (I *ad Cor.* 50). St Ignatius writes to the Smyrnaeans that while heretics remain obdurate they are to be shunned as wild beasts, human only in appearance. Only, they are to be prayed for so that they may undertake the hard task of coming to repentance (*ad Smyrn.* iv, 1). To the Philadelphians he writes: 'God does not dwell where there is division and anger. But the Lord pardons all who repent if this repentance leads them to unity with God and with the synod of the bishop' (*ad Philad.* viii, 1). Though he refers to no formal reconciliation, the idea which underlies the place of a formal reconciliation is there: a restoration to unity with God achieved through reconciliation with the body of the Church under the bishop. St Polycarp's letter to the Philadelphians refers to a priest who, together with

his wife, had left the Church and become an idolater. The saint asks them to join him in sorrow for them: 'May the Lord grant them true repentance. Be level-headed (*sobrii*) in this, and do not consider such to be your enemies. Call them back as suffering and erring members, to preserve the body of you all. In doing this you build up yourselves.'<sup>1</sup> The reason for this clemency is that 'we are all debtors to sin' (*ad Philad.* 6). We cannot be certain that this was not a private repentance, but the reference to 'body of you all' suggests a reconciliation with the corporate unity of the Church, as in St Ignatius.

*The Shepherd* of Hermas, which dates from the last years of St Polycarp, is of a quite different character, yet it confirms and adds clarifications to these evidences. In his vision, Hermas speaks to the Angel of Penance: 'I have heard, sir, said I, from certain teachers that there is no other repentance than that one when we went down into the water and received remission of our former sins.'<sup>2</sup> He said to me, You have heard correctly, for so it is.' However, due to the compassion and mercy of God, a baptized Christian is allowed to return after his first grave lapse, but not after that: '... if a man should be tempted by the devil and sin, he has one repentance. But if he sin repeatedly and repent, it is unprofitable for such a man, for hardly shall he live' (Mand. iv, 3, 1-6). To do penance after a first post-baptismal lapse is to have restored the baptismal seal which had been broken. The reconciliation of the penitent is seen symbolically as his re-incorporation into the tower (the Church), and the work of the local pastor (bishop) is related to the work of the heavenly Pastor who tests and scrutinizes the value of the living stones who make up the unity of the Church. Some form of reconciliation to the Church is therefore necessary, and this is allowed only once. The underlying idea of a restoration to the unity of the Church—which is an earthly counterpart to what is essentially heavenly—remains the same.

These early texts witness to the doctrinal conception of penance. Later texts show us how penance was in fact administered,

<sup>1</sup> *ad Philad.* 11. This is from a section of which only a Latin version has been preserved, which lessens our certainty about its meaning.

<sup>2</sup> Behind this is Heb. x, 26: 'For if we sin wilfully after having the knowledge of the truth, there is now left no sacrifice for sins'. According to P. Galtier, *Aux Origines du Sacrement de Pénitence*, this would seem to refer to lapsing back simply into Jewish practices. It seems that too rigorist an interpretation comes from taking it out of its context (*op. cit.*, p. 80 ff).

and give light on the following four problems. Firstly, the question of degrees of sin; whether some are beyond forgiveness, others too trivial to need formal reconciliation. Secondly, whether it was allowed only once. Thirdly, whether it was the sacrament of penance as we know it. Fourthly, the exact nature of the formal reconciliation—which will provide indications on its standing as a sacrament.

At the end of the second century, St Clement of Alexandria tells the story of how St John sought out a Christian who had become a robber. 'Kneeling down and praying and tenderly kissing his right hand as having been purified by his repentance, he brought him back to the Church' (*Quis Dives Salvetur*, 42). However, he allows only the possibility of one repentance, for to repent continually and successively of one's faults is the same as never having had the faith except where it brings consciousness of sin (*Strom.* ii, 13, 57). He gives no account of the formal reconciliation.

From Rome at about the same time comes another story, related by Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* v, 28), of a young man who had lapsed into Theodotianism and become a bishop. Suddenly filled with remorse (and according to the story, beaten by angels), he put on sack-cloth and ashes and threw himself at the feet of the pope (Zephyrinus, A.D. 199-217), and the clergy and people, who were with difficulty moved to receive him back into communion.

Generosity in giving pardon to the penitent caused schisms by way of protest in the pontificate of Zephyrinus' successor, Callistus. He asserted in an edict his power to absolve adulterers and fornicators. Clearly by this time reconciliation and absolution were seen as necessarily connected—absolution from sin being necessary to allow union among the body of the faithful. Two outstanding Christians, Tertullian and Hippolytus, went into schism rather than accept this, Tertullian becoming a Montanist. For him there was only the possibility of one post-baptismal reconciliation (*De Poen.* vii, 2), and he contended that adultery, idolatry and murder were three capital sins which could not be forgiven by a bishop in virtue of his order—although they could be forgiven by one having a special charismatic power (*De Pudic.* 21)—; the Montanists were characterized by ecstatic behaviour. We know from St Cyprian that some of the North African bishops would not absolve from adultery, and he comments that they

have their own responsibility before God for this; but to contend that they could not was a different matter.

At about the same time the nature of the rite of reconciliation appears as an imposition of hands with an accompanying prayer. It is clearly the practice in Origen, in the *Didascalia of the Apostles* and in St Cyprian—by whose time the practice of penance may be said to be fixed. If we accept an early second century date for the *Didascalia*, it will be interesting to compare its teaching with that of Origen with which it will then be contemporary, and both will witness to the condition of things before the Novatian schism.

In the *Didascalia*, jurisdiction over sinners is given to the bishop: 'And thus, in the Church, sit and utter your word as one having power to judge for God those who have sinned, since to you bishops has been said through the gospel: "Whatsoever you have bound on earth is bound in heaven"' (ch. 5 ed. Connelly). The various formulas which Origen uses ('through the voice of the bishop', 'through the sentence of the bishop', etc.) showed that his teaching was the same. According to both the *Didascalia* and Origen, the bishop begins his examination privately; then, if necessary, he brings in witnesses, and after that he can take the person before the whole Church. But if the correction begins by being private, the penance is clearly public. The sinner has cut himself off from communion with the Church, whether his sin was public or not, for if he has committed a grave sin he has extinguished the life of the Holy Spirit within him. Penance and reconciliation are the only way of return. According to the *Didascalia*, he is to fast for two to seven weeks and exist virtually in the catechumenate; and Origen writes of 'the affliction of the flesh which is usually undertaken by penitents'. He is not allowed to take part in the 'prayers and sacrifice', but only to hear the 'lessons' (this fairly clearly means the mass of the catechumens). The *Didascalia* and Origen are agreed that the rite by which reconciliation is made is the imposition of hands by the bishop, by which the Holy Spirit is restored to those who have lost him. The words of the *Didascalia* about the nature of reconciliation are succinct: 'The imposition of hands will be in the place of baptism for him; for either by the imposition of hands or by baptism they receive a participation of the Holy Spirit' (ch. 10). We might comment that as the penance before baptism provides the pat-

tern of penance in a post-baptismal lapse, so the gift of God is the same: a restoration of what was given in baptism. It is impossible not to see in this what we know as the sacrament of penance.

Were all sins forgivable, and how often was reconciliation possible? The *Didascalia* does not provide us with complete certainty on these questions. In ch. 5 we read that 'if anyone shall have sinned after baptism, he is condemned to gehenna'. But that this should be interpreted as a general statement—the consequence of loss of the Holy Spirit—is shown by ch. 7 which holds up the example of God forgiving Manasses of murder, and our Lord forgiving the adulteress. Ch. 20 says that sins which are not deadly are pardoned, and by martyrdom sins are covered and the martyr leaves this world blessed. 'Deadly' could refer to the three capital sins of idolatry, murder and adultery, or all of what we call 'grave' sins. In asserting that martyrdom covers sins, it seems to be saying that although the Church cannot reconcile the sinner again, he is committed to the mercy of God. Origen is clearer: for the graver sins there is one penance, for the others (*ista communia*), by which he seems to mean the faults which all men commit, there is the possibility of more than one penance (*in Lev. xv, 2*). The graver sins seem to be included under 'mortal crimes' or 'blasphemy against faith' (*ibid.*). From another text we have a list of mortal offences which includes adultery, homicide and idolatry along with others (*in Matt. xiii, 30*).

Quite clearly in Origen, mortal sins include hidden and private sins. He says that if there is any doubt about their seriousness a 'doctor of souls' should be consulted as to whether they are 'a sickness which ought to be exposed and cured in the meeting of the whole Church' (*in Ps. xxxvii, 6*). What of those which are not considered sufficiently serious? No ceremony is prescribed. But perhaps other elements in Origen's theology can be taken as referring to the current thought with regard to them. There is much scope for penitence in his theology: the personal acceptance of the burning light of the Logos into the soul, through which sins are purged away in the agony of remorse; and there is also the union with the prayer of Christ, the angels and saints, which works continually for the remission of sins. Perhaps it was only in these private ways that 'venial' sins were remitted.

The persecutions of the Emperor Decius brought up the ques-

tion of the reconciliation of the many lapsed; and the schism of Novatus was a protest against the ease with which this was done. St Cyprian, who opposed Novatus, gives us confirmation that the practices which have been described had become current usage. 'By imposition of the hand of the bishop and clergy, they receive the right of communication' (*Ep.* xvi, 1). 'Having accepted the peace, he receives the Spirit of the Father' (*Ep.* lvii, 4). Confession is made even of private grave sins, for those who were guilty only of considering apostasy came to confession, and 'sought a saving healing for their wounds, although they were few and not deep' (*De Lapsis* 28). Penances were graded according to the seriousness of the sin. The *libellatici*, who had obtained false papers saying that they had offered sacrifice, were reconciled after a time (*interim*), the *sacrificati* who had actually offered sacrifice, only on their death-bed. St Cyprian even gives some evidence that some mortal sins (as we, at least, consider them) were forgivable more than once. Writing of some consecrated virgins who had been found with men, he judged that those who had been found not to have lost their virginity should be received back into the Church after a penance, but should be warned that on another occasion they would not be received back so easily. Those who had lost their virginity should perform full penance (*Ep.* lxii).

In conclusion: the practice of penance in the early Church is a consequence of the conception of the nature of the Church and its worship. While the need of an attitude of penance is insisted on for all, grave sins committed after baptism were considered such as to cut off the sinner from communion with the Church, to render him unable to take part in the Church's sacrifice, and to deprive him of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Reconciliation and absolution went together, and were administered by the bishop who retained a jurisdiction over what sins he could remit and the length of penance he could impose. The penitent was received back into communion with the Church, and his sins remitted by the imposition of hands of the bishop (or sometimes of a deputed priest), in which the Holy Spirit was again given him. Though it seems that in the earliest times reconciliation and absolution could only be given once, the suggestion is offered (from putting together the evidence of Origen and St Cyprian) that there was a later conception of 'full penitence' which was possible only once for the worse cases of the species of mortal sin,



while for the less serious cases of mortal sin there was the possibility of absolving from mortal sin more than once. Venial sins do not seem to have been confessed, and absolution from them may well have been sought through personal sorrow, and perhaps through sacramentals, which brought to the sinner the fruit of the prayer of the whole Church.



## A STUDY IN FOURTEENTH-CENTURY PIETY

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SOME years ago there came into my hands a little book in Middle French entitled *Le Saint Voyage de Jherusalem*. Its author was a certain Seigneur d'Angleure, who in 1395 made the pilgrimage to the holy places, and included in his itinerary Mount Sinai and the monasteries of Anthony and Paul in Egypt. It was a very comprehensive journey; the Seigneur had an eye for detail and would have excelled today as a compiler of Blue Guides or Baedekers. He could not write a travelogue in the Morton style, however, still less Waugh's, and the value of his record lies in the remarkably complete list of relics and customs which he managed to 'do' with disarming simplicity and devotion. His piety is not repulsive, for the charitable anxiety of the good knight and his contemporaries to leave no event of scripture unmarked for the edification of the faithful covers a multitude of transgressions committed in their identification. I am not aware that this work has been made available in English; a selection of its material will not come amiss to throw an entertaining light on the piety of the medieval pilgrim some hundred years before reformers were to slight such exercises as abuse.

The pilgrims seem to have shut their eyes to passing interest as far as Venice where, in the Maison-Dieu, they opened them to see a tooth of Goliath, one and a half feet in length. The Seigneur relaxes to give us a fair amount of commentary here, admonishing the reader that he 'need not be so surprised' at its size and weight, and pointlessly retails the entire episode of the combat with David