

PENANCE AND THE CHURCH

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MODERN reflection¹ on the sacrament of penance stresses three points: the special dimension of sin committed after baptism, i.e., its relation to the Church; the cultic nature of the sacramental remission of this sin; and the pastoral value of the sacrament of penance. The angle of approach is theological rather than juridical or moral, seeking an understanding of the sacrament of penance in the light of the mystery of the Church.

I. *The Relation of post-baptismal sin to the Church*

The Church is the continuation in time of the incarnation of Christ and the realization through the centuries of the salvation of mankind worked by him. One aspect of the incarnation and of the work of salvation was to manifest the definitive, eschatological judgment of God on sin; this aspect is seen above all in the death of Christ: 'God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and of sin, hath condemned sin in the flesh' (Rom. viii, 3). This manifestation of the judgment of God on sin is continued in the mystical Body of Christ: 'In whom also you are circumcised with circumcision, not made by hand in despoiling of the body of the flesh, but in the circumcision of Christ' (Col. ii, 11). Thus the Church lies under the judgment of God; it is the eschatological reality, the 'circumcision not made by hand', the solidarity of the Body of the Cross.²

The mode of existence proper to the Body of the Cross is death to sin: 'For we are buried together with him (Christ) by baptism into death. . . . So do you also reckon that you are dead to sin. . . . Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body . . . but present yourselves to God as those that are alive from the

1 Cf. La Maison-Dieu, 55 and 56 (1958) *La pénitence dans la liturgie*.

M. Schmaus, *Katholische Dogmatik Band IV*, München, 1952.

K. Rahner, 'Vergessene Wahrheiten über das Buss sakrament', *Schriften zur Theologie*, Einsiedeln, 1955.

A. Chanson, *Pour mieux confesser*, Arras, 1958 (7th ed.).

2 Cf. *The Body*, J. A. T. Robinson (Studies in Biblical Theology No. 5), S.C.M. Press, 1952. Ch. 2, 'The Body of the Cross'.

dead' (Rom. vi, 4, 11-13). Through baptism the Christian receives the death of sin as a divine gift which is his entry into that mode of existence characterized as death to sin. Death of sin comes to him as incorporation into the Body of the Cross. To live according to this new mode of existence he receives the spirit of the Church, the spirit of hostility to sin: 'I will put enmities between thee and the woman' (Gen. iii, 15). And his life according to the Body of the Cross is described by St Paul as: 'always bearing about in our body the mortification of Jesus' (2 Cor. iv, 10).

Whilst this world lasts, the Body of the Cross lives in the medium of conflict; for its victory over sin by dominion lies in the future. The *parousia* will be the manifestation of that final phase of the victory of Christ and of the judgment of God. In this medium of conflict the Christian can fail to be what he is: a member of the Body of the Cross. By his personal sin he ceases to live, either totally in the case of grave sin or partially in the case of venial sin, according to the mode of existence proper to the Body of the Cross. To speak of grave sin: this sin is a denial of the victory of Christ and of the judgment of God, a betrayal of the eschatological reality which is the Body of the Cross. Scripture speaks of the special gravity of this sin of the Christian: 'For if, flying from the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they be again entangled in them and overcome: their latter state is become unto them worse than the former' (2 Pet. ii, 20). The sin of the Christian is a sin in the Church, he sins as a member of the Body of the Cross. His personal sin takes on a corporate dimension, not simply in the sense of diffusing sin (scandal), but also because it is an obstacle to the Church-making work of God, to that work of God bringing the Body of the Cross to the fulness wherein it can give perfect testimony to Christ's victory on the Cross and to the divine judgment on sin. The sin of the Christian becomes, too, the sin of the Church in a certain sense, in that the Church, as present in the Christian, passes into the power of Satan.

On the other hand, the Body of the Cross, the Church as manifesting the victory over sin of her Lord, cannot fail in this conflict with sin. To her Christ made the promise, 'the gates of hell shall not prevail against you'. She has the function of waging conflict with sin as this is found in the member of the Body of the Cross.

For this reason the situation of the Christian guilty of grave sin is not hopeless. There is the possibility of a return to the Body of the Cross, because the Church has the function of reconciling those of her members who have separated themselves from her by grave sin (cf. Acts viii, 18-24 and I Cor. v, 1-13), and through baptism the sinner still has a relation to the Church. But this return cannot be accomplished without the Church. As the sin of the Christian is related to the Church, so the remission of that sin bears a relation to the Church. The Christian sins in the Church; he finds the forgiveness of that sin in the Church. Whether administered according to the rites in use in the early Church or according to those now used in the Church, the sacramental remission of the sin committed after baptism is always public in the sense that it takes place in a reconciliation with the Church. This reconciliation with the Church is not the actual forgiveness of sin. It is God who forgives the sin committed after baptism through the ministry of the Church in the sacrament of penance. But the place in which that divine forgiveness is realized is the maternal function of the Church.

With their profound appreciation of the Church's maternal function, the Fathers emphasized the role of the Church, the *plebs sancta*, in the sacramental remission of sin committed after baptism. They found in the gospel story of the widow of Naim an apt symbol for this role (Luke vii, 11-15). The Church weeps for the sinner seeking forgiveness in the sacrament of penance, as the widow mother wept for her only son. This weeping is the symbol of the intercession of the Church, of the asking of the solidarity of the Body of the Cross for the sacramental remission of sin. Into this intercession the sacrament of penance comes as a divine event. In the sacrament of penance God gives the remission of sin committed after baptism through the ministry of the Church. But the connection between the sacrament and the intercession of the Church needs to be seen. God gives the remission of sin as a gracious gift, but he wills that the Church should ask for his gift. His gift comes to the Christian in this setting of the Church's asking. The Church plays a dual role in this, as in other sacraments. As mother of the Christian she makes intercession for the sinner, as minister of her Lord she mediates the reconciliation between the sinner and God. The two roles need to be distinguished. A possible danger in reading the Fathers and

in studying the penitential practice of the early Church is to concentrate on the maternal role of the Church to the exclusion of her ministerial role, or to confuse this latter with the former. But there is the other danger of stressing the Church's ministerial role in such a way that the maternal role is overlooked or reduced to the ministerial role. Mary on Calvary is the model of the Church in her maternal role in the sacrament of penance. What Mary then did once, and for all her children, the Church continues to do for each of her children as they come to the sacrament of penance. In her ministerial role the Church bears a moral resemblance to, acts in the name of, Christ who consummated his victory over sin on Calvary.

The classical prayer of the Christian sinner, the 'I confess', perfectly expresses the relation to the Church of sin committed after baptism, both as a sin committed in the Church, and as a sin the remission of which is found in the Church. In the first half of that prayer the sinner confesses to God and to his Church in heaven and on earth. The second half is the sinner's appeal to the Church to make intercession with God asking for the remission of his sin.

To see sin committed after baptism in relation to the Church reveals at the same time the special evil of that sin and the role of the Church in its remission. It reveals sin committed after baptism as an offence against the kingdom of God on earth which is the Church. It reveals the Church as the mother who by her intercession brings to the sinner the divine gift of forgiveness, and as the minister of the sacrament in which he receives that gift. Thanksgiving after the sacrament of penance should include a grateful recognition of this dual role of the Church, as well as the determination to make satisfaction for the offence committed against the kingdom of God on earth which is the Church. And when the sinner is overwhelmed by a sense of impotence before his own sin, then too he needs to remember the relation of the Church to the remission of his sin. In this context the Fathers see a symbol of the Church's maternal role in the friends who carried the paralytic and set him at the feet of Jesus (Luke v, 18-19).

II

The cultic nature of the remission of post-baptismal sin

The Church is a sacral society. The words of Exodus xix, 6: 'And you shall be to me a priestly kingdom, and a holy nation', find their full meaning in the Church of Christ. She is consecrated by him to worship the living God in spirit and in truth: 'And for them do I sanctify myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth' (John xvii, 19). Her worship is the celebration of the mighty acts in which God reveals himself, and among these is that of the forgiveness of sin committed after baptism. The Church celebrates the liturgy of intercession, also called the liturgy of the prodigal son, as well as the liturgy of thanksgiving. There is a cultic side to the sacramental remission of sin committed after baptism. In the early Church prominence was given to this aspect of the reconciliation of the sinner. There was a ritual for this reconciliation closely resembling that used in Christian initiation and, like this latter, placed in the most solemn part of the Church's life of worship: the celebration of the paschal mysteries.

This cultic aspect of the sacrament of penance is still present in the administration of the sacrament, and modern writers draw attention to it. The essential part of this celebration is made up of the sacramental acts of the penitent—his confession of sin and his acceptance of his penance, external acts revealing his internal contrition for his sin—and the absolution given by the priest, this latter being the chief act of the sacrament. Around this nucleus the other elements are grouped.

In the celebration of the sacrament of penance the penitent takes an active part. He exercises the priestly function to which he was deputed when he received the character of the sacrament of baptism. His confession of sin is not a monologue, it is his part in a dialogue. And the same holds for the absolution pronounced by the priest. The penitent confessing to the priest and the priest absolving the penitent is a real encounter between the sinner and the Saviour.

There is another encounter in the sacrament, another dialogue in which the penitent is called upon again to take an active part. This time the penitent encounters the Church as she fulfils her maternal role in the sacramental remission of sin committed after baptism. The priest is the representative of Christ when he

pronounces in his name the words of absolution. But he is the representative of the Church our mother in the prayers which he says whilst administering the sacrament. It is through him that the Church asks God for the sacrament of penance, as it is through him that the Church helps the penitent to find the divine forgiveness of his sin. In these prayers recited by the priest the Church expresses to the penitent her maternal heart. She does not speak about the penitent, she speaks to him; there is a dialogue here. It is true that circumstances often conceal this aspect of the sacrament of penance, but always it is there. The prayers explain the nature of this encounter. In reply to the penitent's request for a blessing ('Pray, Father, give me your blessing') the Church asks God to give the graces necessary to make a good confession. The Amen to this prayer finds its right place on the lips of the penitent. The 'I confess' is the penitent's second approach to the Church, this time to proclaim that he has sinned in the Church and to ask for the intercession of the Church with God that his sin may be forgiven. The prayer signifying that the Church, in the person of her representative the priest, makes this intercession is the 'May almighty God . . .'. And the Amen to this prayer belongs to the penitent. The Church then proceeds with her role in the remission of sin by reconciling the sinner. And now to words (the *Indulgentiam* . . .) she adds gesture, using the raised hand of the priest to signify what she is doing. The Church in this way presents the sinner as her child to Christ, and he through the absolution of his minister the priest restores the now forgiven sinner to the Church as one again engaged in her life of conflict with sin. The final word of the Church to the penitent is to pray in the *Passio Domini nostri* that God may give him the grace to fulfil this engagement. Here too the Amen belongs to the penitent. The rite for the administration of the sacrament envisages the dialogue between the penitent and Christ. Perhaps the fuller participation of the laity in the liturgy of thanksgiving, the mass, may stimulate the desire to take a more active part in the liturgy of intercession. It is questionable whether the practice of urging the penitent to say the act of contrition whilst the priest says the prayers and words of absolution is the best means of helping the penitent to fulfil his role in the sacrament.

To stress the cultic role of the sacrament of penance helps to take the Christian into the life of the Church. It can also lead to an

appreciation of those canticles and psalms in which are celebrated the mighty works of God delivering his servants from the hands of their enemies. What is confessed is not only sin but belief in God delivering the sinner from his sin. What is celebrated is the victory of Christ and the judgment of God on sin present in the member of the Church.

III. *The pastoral value of the sacrament of penance*

The aim of the pastoral work of the Church is to enable the life of the Church received by the Christian in baptism to grow to its divinely appointed term, hence the maternal character of the Church's care of souls. In its turn, this life of the Church is received from Christ. Relative to him, the purpose of the Church born of the side of the Saviour is to give testimony, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the life of her Lord. And for his part Christ lives to bear witness to his Father, to the divine judgment on Satan, sin and death. This he does by manifesting the triumph of the Father over the powers of evil in his own victory over those same powers consummated in the death of the Cross. To the mortification of Christ ('mortification' taken, not in the moral sense of the self-denial of what is lawful, but in the theological sense of the death of Christ as manifesting the triumph of God over sin), to his victorious conflict with the powers of evil, the Church bears witness in her own mortification and life of conflict with those powers. Her conflict and victory over sin gives testimony to the victory over sin of her Lord because it is his victory which makes hers possible, because her victory is the realization of his victory. The life of the Church is, then, a mortification in this sense of giving testimony, by a ceaseless conflict with the powers of evil, to the mortification of Christ. So the aim of her pastoral work must be to ensure the development of this life of mortification in her children. Here her maternal function is to educate the Christian in this life of conflict and in its ultimate meaning, which is to proclaim the glory of God by manifesting Christ's victory of the Cross. Her most effective weapon for this task is the sacrament of penance when this is seen in its relation to the Church's life of mortification, as well as in its ultimate effect which is the remission of sin.

This life of mortification or penance (the term is taken beyond the limited meaning of the acquittal of the debt of temporal

punishment due to sin, the guilt of which has been remitted) supposes that the Church has an understanding of the nature and evil of sin in the light of God's word condemning sin. It is this understanding which lies behind the Church's preaching of penance, her effort to educate the Christian in the sense of the mystery of sin: the offence against God our Father and the obstacles to his kingdom. The privileged time for this preaching of penance is the season of Lent. But in the sacrament of penance the Church finds another privileged occasion for this preaching of penance; it is in this context that the *monitio* of the confessor finds its full significance.

Passing from understanding to practice, the Church seeks to educate the Christian to a life of mortification by introducing him to the practice of penance. Again Lent with its penitential practices occupies the primary place, followed up by the other days of fasting and the weekly Friday abstinence. This element of the Church's life of mortification finds its place in the sacrament of penance. By its very nature, the confession of sin to the priest is an onerous practice.

Finally, in her conflict with sin in the Christian the Church is able to use her vast accumulation of knowledge both speculative and practical concerning the causes and occasions of sin, concerning the effects of sin, and concerning the ways by which these effects may be overcome and sin avoided in the future. In various ways the Church uses this ascetical wisdom, but again the sacrament of penance affords a privileged occasion. The confessor, in the mind of the Church, holds not only the *claves potestatis* but also the *claves scientiae*.

By her preaching and practice of penance, by the use of her ascetical skill, the Church in her care for souls seeks to develop the life of mortification in the Christian, that, in his victorious conflict with sin, she may be able to testify to the victory of Christ over sin and, together with him, to the divine judgment on sin. But her most effective weapon in this care of souls is the sacrament of penance, for by this she is able to make present to the Christian Christ's victory over sin. The sacrament of penance brings into the Church's life of mortification the event of Christ's mortification. Through the sacramental acts of the penitent and that of the priest—the *sacramentum tantum* of the sacrament—the Christian encounters Christ in his victory over sin and is assim-

lated to his mortification. This assimilation gives to the penitent a status in the Church—his reconciliation with the Church—which is to manifest in his own sin, now overcome, the victory of Christ. Assimilation to the mortification of Christ (interior penance) and the new relation to the Church are two aspects of the one *res et sacramentum* of the sacrament. From this follows the grace of forgiveness, the *res tantum* of the sacrament. In the case of the remission of mortal sin this grace of forgiveness means the restoration of sanctifying grace. In the case of the remission of venial sin the grace of forgiveness is seen as a growth of sanctifying grace.

The sacrament of penance personally engages the Christian in the Church's life of conflict with sin. The assimilation to the mortification of Christ which it produces is a consecration to that life, the sacramental renewal of the baptismal consecration. And the penance imposed by the confessor, besides its penal aspect, signifies this; to accept the penance is to accept the engagement. The Church prays in the *Passio Domini nostri*, the concluding prayer of the sacramental rite, that henceforth the Christian may live up to this consecration.

The means to fulfil his engagement the Christian finds in the sacrament. The consecration is a pledge of grace necessary for overcoming sin, particularly that sin which formed the object of confession. In the reconciliation with the Church he finds a valuable assurance of solidarity. But it is above all in the actual living of his engagement—and here the devotional use of the sacrament has an important part to play—that the Church's life of mortification gradually comes to inform his own life more and more. He is taken beyond the immediate context of his own conflict with sin. His view is widened to embrace those other fields where the Church's conflict with sin goes on unceasingly. Something of the intensity of the Church's solicitude for sinners enters his heart, he comes to share her anxious care for the careless and the lapsed, for all sinners. From this penetration into his life of mortification of the Church's mortification the Christian comes to know with the concrete knowing of experience the vicarious nature of Christ's mortification, to know the place appointed by God to satisfaction and merit in the plan of salvation. The way is opened up to following Christ here. Prayer and penance for sinners become an essential aspect of his life of mortification. The words of the Our Father: 'Forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive them that trespass against us', and those of the Hail Mary: 'Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death', taking on a new and deeper meaning, become the constant reminder of the sacramental engagement. So in the effort to live this engagement the Christian comes to know and to accept his responsibilities for the Church of sinners, for the life of the Church as this is found in sinners. This is a deep experience of fellowship in the Church, of living *ut pars*; it shows that the life of mortification has developed to an adult stage under the maternal care of the Church.

Mary, the sinless mother of God, is the type of the Church in its life of mortification. The testimony in the power of the Holy Spirit, which she gave during her life to the victory of Christ and to the judgment of the Father, is the model of the Church's testimony to that victory and judgment. And her maternal solicitude for sinners animates the heart of that other mother, the Church, to whose care Christ has committed sinful mankind. This aspect of Mary is seen in the Church's dogmatic teaching of her immaculate conception and of her assumption: the beginning and the end, victory in conflict moving to victory in dominion over Satan, sin, and death. In her is seen in a unique way the effect of Christ's victory on the Cross and of the Father's judgment on sin.

Mary's own gracious interventions in the life of the Church during the past century have this same purpose of recalling to Christians that aspect of the Church's life which is to give testimony in her mortification to the victory of Christ and to the judgment of God. This is the lesson of Lourdes and of Fatima. Further, she urgently invites Christians to engage themselves at all the levels of their lives in this mortification of the Church. In her turn, she pledges her royal power and her maternal affection; to the Church that she may be unfailing in her care to develop in Christians the life of mortification, to the Christian that their lives may be such that in them the Church can bear her witness to the victory of her Lord and to the judgment of her God. In the sacrament of penance the Church reveals most intimately her maternal care for the life of mortification; in the full use of that same sacrament the Christian enables the Church to resemble Mary in the glory of the testimony she bears to the victory of her divine Son and to the judgment of the eternal Father.