

ST. AUGUSTINE'S NOTION  
OF  
PENANCE AND RECONCILIATION WITH THE CHURCH  
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## PREFACE

The liturgical revival of the post-war era, which culminated in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council, has not as yet had a very profound effect on the sacrament of penance. In general, Catholics regard the sacrament as a private affair between themselves and their confessor for the purpose of obtaining divine forgiveness. The individualistic nature of the sacrament's present ritual obstructs a communal awareness of sin and forgiveness. Fortunately, the Council directed that the rite and formula of penance be revised so that a more communal awareness could be fostered. Although there have been no revisions thus far, experimentation with communal penance services which usually include private confession have become more and more widespread.

The aim of this study is to investigate the communal or ecclesial dimension of sin and forgiveness in the writings of Saint Augustine of Hippo. I will examine both the penitential praxis during Augustine's episcopate and his speculative thought on sin and forgiveness. My hope is that this investigation will lend support to arguments for revision in the sacramental ritual which would make it more meaningful, especially

from the communal standpoint.

With very few exceptions, I have personally translated from the Latin all of the excerpts from Augustine's writings contained herein. In each case, I have used the most critical text of the excerpt translated. Therefore, the following is the order of preference: 1. Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina (CC); 2. Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (CSEL); 3. Patrologia Latina (PL).

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CHAPTER I  
BACKGROUND STUDY

A. CURRENT STATUS OF THE PROBLEM

In a number of respects the present form of the sacrament of penance is felt to be unsatisfactory by some theologians. In line with this, the theoretical foundations underlying the present practice of the sacrament are being reexamined. For a considerable number of the faithful, confession is an unpleasant duty of piety performed rather infrequently. To such persons the sacrament consists of a somewhat artificial rite wherein they feel assured of pardon as the reward for telling the confessor a commonplace list of minor sins and saying a few prayers after leaving the confessional.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, many penitents have the impression that penance is of an individualistic nature.<sup>2</sup> Although penitents confess to a priest, a representative of the visible Christian community, and do so in that place established for public worship, everything else connected with penance is private. The dark confessional where confessor and penitent are completely invisible to each other and the whispered words of confession and of absolution obscure for the average penitent the public and joyful character of the sacrament. Many Catholics do not vividly appreciate the sacrament as a personal encounter with the risen

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Dom Claude Jean-Nesmy, Conscience and Confession, trans. Malachy Carroll, (Chicago, 1965) pp. vii-ix.

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Frederick R. McManus, "The Constitution on Liturgy Commentary, Part Three," Worship, XXXVIII (October, 1964), 545.

Christ which demands true conversion from them. Fewer still grasp the ecclesial dimension of penance, or the fact that the sacrament brings about a reconciliation with the Christian community.<sup>1</sup>

For many children, confession is "firstly a feat of memory and secondly a triumph of will over embarrassment."<sup>2</sup> One writer sums up the problem by declaring that,

neither the present rite and formula of the sacrament of penance nor contemporary attitudes manifested in its 'administration' and 'reception' are faithful to its true nature as a personal-ecclesial act of worship. Yet its reform will be vital in the promotion of positive Christian morality and of ecumenical unity.<sup>3</sup>

The "reform" spoken of in the preceding quotation is the one actually directed by the Second Vatican Council in Article 72 of the Liturgical Constitution:

The rite and formula for the sacrament of penance are to be revised so that they more clearly express both the nature and effects of the sacrament.

The wording of this article, specifically the use of the term "nature", was meant to convey the Council Fathers' desire that the social and ecclesial nature of penance, so easily overlooked, might again be clearly recognized.<sup>4</sup> However, the brevity of the Council's directive on Penance seems to suggest that al-

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<sup>1</sup> Frank B. Norris, S.S., "Other Horizons," Worship, XXXVII (January, 1963), pp. 106 and 108.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert McCabe, O.P., "Penance, First of the Sacraments of Return," Jubilee, XII (September, 1964), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Roderick Hindery, O.S.B., "Penance, Sacrament of Conversion," The Homiletic and Pastoral Review, LV (December, 1964), 203.

<sup>4</sup> McManus, Worship, XXXVIII, 545.



though theologians are very much aware of the social and ecclesial nature of penance, they have not as yet studied this aspect in sufficient depth.<sup>1</sup> As the title indicates, the concern of the present study is to determine St. Augustine's ideas in this area. Augustine's writings are a rich source of information about penance in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. It is possible to derive from his works quite a comprehensive treatment of the whole penitential system in both its theoretical and practical aspects.<sup>2</sup> It is felt that this combination of both pastoral and doctrinal ideas by such an eminent Father of the Church might shed some small amount of light on contemporary speculation. The value of a specifically patristic witness regarding penance will be discussed further on. In the following pages, we will take up the total contribution of the Vatican Council concerning the sacrament and review the present thinking of theologians about its ecclesial character.

To begin with, a summary of the comments and suggestions of liturgists on the council's directive to revise the rite of penance will help indicate the trend of current thinking. J.D. Chrichton observes that, while the privacy of the confessional must be preserved, ways should be found to show that penance is an act of the Church and that sin and repentance pertain to the common life of the Church. He mentions one attempt at this consisting of a Bible vigil with scripture readings, prayers, and a general examination of conscience. All this takes place while penitents are actually in the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. R. Hindery, O.S.B., "Repatee (Sin and Confession)," The National Catholic Reporter (Kansas City, Mo.) March 3, 1965, p.4; Jean-Nesmy, Conscience, pp. ix-x.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Poschmann, Penance and the Anointing of the Sick, translated and revised by Francis Courtney, S.J. (New York, 1964), pp. 83-84.

confessionals. Such a procedure is only possible, however, in large parishes where a number of priests are on hand.

The late Bishop Wilhelmus M. Bekkers of Den Bosch, Holland likewise recommends liturgical celebrations of penance together with a private confession of sins. He mentions the support which the whole assembly give to one another as they prepare for the encounter with God in a personal confession.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most important statement made thus far regarding liturgical celebrations of penance (and the only official one by any hierarchy) is contained in a pastoral letter by the Bishops of Holland, March 16, 1965. The bishops state that:

"The institution of public celebrations of penance deserves our positive approval. Hence we recommend that all who have the care of souls call the faithful together from time to time, for instance during Advent and Lent, for public celebrations of penance."<sup>2</sup>

The bishops of Holland differ slightly from Bishop Bekkers' individual opinion when they declare that these public celebrations should not provide an opportunity for private confession unless "the community is small."<sup>3</sup> Bishop Bekkers, on the other hand, states that:

"Just because such strict regulations have been made for the use of the confessional, I can scarcely think of the service in common without one."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> W.M. Bekkers, "Mercy and the Sacrament of Penance," Catholic World, CCIII (July, 1966), 230.

<sup>2</sup> "Public Celebration of Penance: A Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of Holland," reprinted in Worship, XL (May, 1966), 279.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>4</sup> Bekkers, Catholic World, CCIII, 230.



But it is important to note that elsewhere in the bishops' letter they describe public celebrations of penance as a school wherein one learns how to make his private confessions before a priest "a deeper, more personal event."

Father Crichton also considers the formula in the ritual of penance too heavy-handed and legalistic. Penitents are absolved from bonds of excommunication they never incurred.<sup>1</sup> Frederick McManus suggests that this formal absolution from the canonical censures of suspension, interdict, and excommunication be replaced by a formula expressing reconciliation with the Church. Another of his ideas is that the rite of the imposition of hands be restored in some form. It is apparent that the bishop employed it often in the rite of public reconciliation of sinners in the early Church. In most cases today, a physical imposition of hands is not possible; but the significance of this might somehow be conveyed.<sup>2</sup> Another concrete suggestion to be mentioned in connection with article 72 of the Liturgical Constitution perhaps contains a way of restoring the imposition of hands. Roderick

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<sup>1</sup> J. Crichton, The Church's Worship, (New York, 1964), pp. 173-174. See F. Norris, Worship, XXXVII, 106-108, for a similar but more detailed description of a public rite of penance used in France and the Netherlands. He reports that its use has not led to a notable increase in the number of penitents, but that it has enabled regular penitents to "fulfill more perfectly the demands which Christian conversion places upon them and to experience the full dimension of the sacrament." (p. 108)

<sup>2</sup> McManus, Worship, XXXVIII, 545

Hindery recommends that the Ritual of 1614 prescribing that priest and penitent be separated should be rescinded. Then, of course, an imposition of hands would be possible. For those penitents who desired anonymity, confessionals could be designed to provide some sort of sliding grill or veil. Even in the present confessionals confessors have found that leaving their light on helps penitents realize they are talking to a person who signifies the personal presence of Christ. Father Hindery further suggests that the confessional should be enlarged, brightened, better sound-proofed (so that priest and penitent could speak normally rather than whisper), and rendered more beautiful and meaningful with works of art (e.g., a prodigal son or good shepherd theme) and symbols of Christ such as the "chi-rho" on the confessional door. All this would help people remember that penance is a sacrament of renewal and of joyous return instituted in the joy of the Lord's resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

It has been estimated that about five years may be needed to completely reform the rite and formula of penance. Interim liturgies of penance such as the ones described above are presently being tried. The use of the vernacular has, of

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<sup>1</sup>R. Hindery, "Penance, Sacrament of Conversion," The Homiletic and Pastoral Review, LV, (December, 1964), pp. 205-206. See also Agnes Regina Hall, C.S.J., "Revitalizing the Sacrament of Confession," Worship, XL (February, 1966), pp. 100-102.

course, been of some help.<sup>1</sup> The deletion of the act of contrition at the conclusion of the confession has also been beneficial. It allows the penitent to hear the words of absolution. Bishop Bekkers, suggests, in addition, that priest and penitent say the prayer after the absolution together.<sup>2</sup>

One other article in the Liturgical Constitution does make an important mention of penance. Article 109 directs that during Lent the faithful should be instructed regarding:

...not only the social consequences of sin but also that essence of the virtue of penance which leads to the detestation of sin as an offense against God; the role of the Church in penitential practices is not to be passed over, and the people must be exhorted to pray for sinners.

The directive will certainly help to make people aware of the social nature of penitence.<sup>3</sup>

A good deal more light was shed on the "nature and effects" of penance by a statement in Article 11 of the Council's Constitution on the Church. It is interesting to note that it was published on November 21, 1964, about a year after the

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<sup>1</sup> John E. Corrigan, "Pastoral Renewal of Penance," Worship, XXXVII (October, 1964), pp. 565-566.

<sup>2</sup> Bekkers, Catholic World, CCIII. p. 229

<sup>3</sup> Crichton, Church's Worship, p. 208. These social and ecclesial elements will be discussed in some detail in connection with the forthcoming portion on penance in the Council's Constitution on the Church.

Liturgical Constitution. The article describes penance in the following terms:

Those who approach the sacrament of penance obtain pardon from the mercy of God for the offense committed against Him and are at the same time reconciled with the Church, which they have wounded by their sins, and which by charity, example and prayer, seeks their conversion.

Later on, in explaining the functions of the ordained priest, the Constitution states:

For the sick and the sinners among the faithful, they exercise the ministry of alleviation and reconciliation and they present the needs and the prayers of the faithful to God the Father. (Art. 28)

It is clear from these statements that penance is a sacrament of God's willingness to pardon. God is offended in the sense that men, by sinning, refuse his personal self-giving, his love. Moreover, there is no kind of sin which does not somehow hurt a human being whom God loves. Even blasphemy, aside from the possibility of scandal, harms primarily the blasphemer, whom God loves.<sup>1</sup>

But the conciliar statements also express the Church's willingness to reconcile. The sinner is said to "wound" the Church because his effectiveness as a priest and apostle is impeded. At Baptism a Christian accepts the responsibilities of priesthood and apostolate, and at Confirmation the commitment is ratified and deepened. But the condition of grave sin makes it impossible for him to genuinely participate as

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<sup>1</sup>James V. Schall, S.J., "Penance: Redemption of Sins," Worship, XXXVIII (February, 1964), p. 139.

a member of God's priestly people in the Eucharist. Even the condition of less serious sin impedes the Christian's fervor in worshipping the Father. The sinner also fails in his apostolic obligation to communicate to others the sanctifying out-pouring of grace. He is incapable of fully exercising this profound capacity, and this is detrimental to his fellow Christians.<sup>1</sup> The sinful Christian puts himself at odds with the very nature of the Church. For she is holy and must bear witness to the fact that in Christ God's mercy, favor, and holiness have permanently entered history.<sup>2</sup>

A final aspect of the effects of sin upon the Church involves her attitude toward material creation itself. In the opinion of G. M. McCauley, she testifies that this creation has a destiny beyond the world as it now exists. Her mission is to prepare heaven and earth for their transformation into a new heaven and a new earth. Yet the sinner, by treating material creatures as ends in themselves, contributes to a kind of disorientation within creation which hampers its liberation from bondage to decay and its obtaining of the glorious liberty of the sons of God (Rom. 8:21).<sup>3</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup>G. M. McCauley, S.J., "The Ecclesial Nature of the Sacrament of Penance," Worship, XXXVI (March, 1962), pp. 214-215.

<sup>2</sup>Karl Rahner, S.J., De Paenitentia, Tractatus, Dogmaticus (in mimeograph) II, pp. 730-731, quoted in McCauley, see nl above, p. 214.

<sup>3</sup>All scriptural quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.



aspect of sin will help to explain the place that bodily penances have had historically ( and still have) in the reconciliation of sinner to Church.<sup>1</sup> Article 109 of the Liturgical Constitution, discussed above, speaks of instruction of the faithful regarding the "role of the Church in penitential practices." Article 110 directs that Lenten penance "should not be only internal and individual, but also external and social."

Another facet of penance presented by the Constitution on the Church is the role of the members of the Church in seeking the conversion of sinners by charity, example and prayer (Art. 11). Again, the ecclesial dimension of sin and penitence is evident. The Church is "the abiding sacrament of God's mercy in the world."<sup>2</sup> This mercy is manifest through the people of God who seek the conversion or metanoia<sup>3</sup> of sinners and through the Church's ordained representatives who exercise the ministry of reconciliation (Art. 28). Priests and people labor together to restore their sinful brothers to the cultic penance of the Church "for building up the body of Christ." (Eph. 4:12)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> McCauley, Worship, XXXVI, p. 215.

<sup>2</sup> K. Rahner, S.J., The Church and the Sacraments, trans. W. J. O'Hara, (New York, 1963), p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Acts 2:38, 3:19, 26:20.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. G. McCauley, Worship, XXXVI, p. 219



There is perhaps one final point concerning Vatican II's view of penance which should be mentioned. Article 109 of the Liturgical Constitution says that:

The season of Lent has a twofold character; primarily by recalling or preparing for baptism and penance, it disposes the faithful who persevere in hearing the word and in prayer, to celebrate the paschal mystery.

The article makes a close connection between the two sacraments and sees both as pointing to the death-resurrection mystery of Christ. F.X. Durrwell likens penance to a second baptism, since man who has strayed "into a far country" (Luke 15:13) is brought back by penance to the waters of his birth. For the Holy Spirit is continually, and not simply at the first baptism, a water of divine generation (John 3:5, Tit. 3:5). The Christian finds again the joy of his baptism, the joy of being born and of loving the Father with a child's love. What St. Paul said of baptism, "...all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death," (Rom. 6:3) can also be said of penance. This second baptism is painful since it immerses man in that continual death to self demanded by the first baptism.<sup>1</sup> As the Liturgical Constitution makes clear, Lent is the most appropriate time to renew the death-resurrection

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<sup>1</sup>  
F. X. Durrwell, C.S. S.R., In the Redeeming Christ, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York, 1963), pp. 69-70 and 74.

mystery of Christ in ourselves.

Penance is the Christian life being  
lived again and lived more intently;  
it is<sup>1</sup> Christian effort made a sacra-  
ment.

The preceding description of the pastoral problems surrounding penance and the analysis of the Council's teaching concerning it lead to these conclusions: 1) There is quite general awareness by the Church that the present liturgy of penance is inadequate and that the sacrament itself is not sufficiently understood. 2) There is a growing understanding by theologians of the effects of sin upon the Church and of the indispensibility of the reconciliation of sinner to Church in the penitential process. 3) The lack of certainty about how the rite and formula of penance are to be revised and the inadequate understanding of the sacrament mentioned in the first conclusion suggest that more study is necessary concerning penance, especially its ecclesial dimension.

The basic question which is being posed in this study of Augustine's teaching on penance is: what did it mean to Augustine for a penitent to be reconciled with the Church? But before analyzing his view, we will review the contemporary thinking about reconciliation with the Church.

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<sup>1</sup>  
Durrwell, p. 70.

B. CONTEMPORARY THINKING ABOUT RECONCILIATION WITH THE CHURCH

The opinion of the majority of theologians today is that reconciliation with the Church is the res et sacramentum of penance.<sup>1</sup> As a prelude to their arguments a brief look at the nature of the res et sacramentum is called for. The following summary is that of Karl Rahner. He describes it as an intermediate reality between the external sacramental sign or sacramentum and divine grace, which is the effect or res sacramenti. Grace, of course, is the ultimate object of the sign-causality of a sacrament. Thus, the res et sacramentum, as the name implies, has the character of an effect in relation to the sacramental sign and the character of a sign in relation to the sacramental grace. Moreover, in those sacraments where the res et sacramenta are most apparent, they have an ecclesial orientation. The sacramental character of baptism (its res et sacramentum) permanently incorporates the baptized person into the Church as her member. The character of orders is a mandate for a specific function in the Church. The res et sacramentum of the Eucharist is a deeper incorporation into the mystical body of

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<sup>1</sup> Paul F. Palmer, S.J., "The Theology of the 'Res et Sacramentum'", in Readings in Sacramental Theology, ed. C. Stephen Sullivan, F.S.C. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.; 1964), p. 116. Palmer points out (p. 114) that Bartholomew Xiberta, O. Carm., first presented the theory that reconciliation with the Church is the res et sacramentum of penance in his doctoral dissertation Clavis Ecclesiae (Rome, 1922).

Christ through communal reception of his body.<sup>1</sup>

Rahner's argument for the reconciliation with the Church as the res et sacramentum of penance begin with an analysis of two similar verses from Matthew's gospel:

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (16:19)

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (18:18)<sup>2</sup>

These verses essentially indicate that God forgives us our trespasses, and that this forgiveness is given a visible sacramental form and a meaningful presence in a Christian's life by the word of the Church. But the passages also indicate that the Church does not "loose" in an area where it has not previously "bound". In other words, it is not a question in the Matthean texts of e.g., binding Catholics to abstain from meat on Friday, and (in what is a completely different case) loosing a Catholic from the canon forbidding mixed marriages. Rather, "loosing" is the desired effect of "binding" in these texts, so that a person is loosed from the very ban imposed on him by the Church. "To bind on earth" means that the Church officially shows forth the twofold estrangement which has arisen through

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<sup>1</sup> K. Rahner, S.J., "Forgotten Truths Concerning Penance" in Theological Investigations, Vol. II, trans. Karl-H. Kruger (Baltimore, 1963), pp. 170-171.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. John 20:23.

a Christian's act of sin: 1) estrangement between God and the sinner, and 2) between the Church herself and the sinner. The Church, holy with the holiness of Christ her spouse, must react against grave sin by a binding and banning of the sinner. The ban is lifted only when the Church knows that God has loosed the sinner "in heaven" by forgiving his guilt. Yet God's loosing the sinner is in turn dependent upon a previous loosing by the Church both from the ecclesial side of the sinner's guilt and from the resultant ban which she imposed (e.g., exclusion from the eucharistic table.) Loosing in heaven is caused, then, by loosing on earth, even though the effective loosing on earth came about by the repentant return of man to God.<sup>1</sup> And so the movement is from repentance by the sinner, to a sacramental manifestation of it by his doing ecclesial penance and being loosed on earth, to loosing in heaven.<sup>2</sup> By granting the sinner the gift of her peace and by giving him again her spiritual love in an authoritative way, the Church thereby grants him peace with God.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rahner, Investigations II, pp. 166-168.

<sup>2</sup> In our refutation of the opponents of reconciliation with the Church as the res et sacramentum of penance, we will attempt to show in more detail that reconciliation with the Church (loosing on earth) is not the equivalent of a return to the grace of God.

<sup>3</sup> Rahner, Investigations II, p. 168.



Henri deLubac argues from the communal dimension of all the sacraments to the conclusion that reconciliation with the Church is the res et sacramentum of penance. As the sacraments bring about, renew or deepen man's union with Christ, by that very fact they bring about, renew, or deepen his union with the Christian community. In fact, it is through the Christian's union with the community that he is united to Christ. Sacramental grace does not set up a purely individual relationship between a human being and Christ. Rather, the individual receives such grace in proportion as he is joined socially to that one body which is the source of grace-life. The sacraments are ecclesial realities producing their effect in the Church, "the society of the Spirit." DeLubac then shows that baptism's first effect is a social event: entry into the visible Church. From this flows the baptismal character and the sacramental grace of regeneration. Entry into the visible religious society brings about incorporation into the Mystical Body. Moreover, "as the waters flow over the foreheads of catechumens, the effect is not a series of incorporations but a 'concorporation' [i.e., a joining together] of the whole Church in one mysterious unity."

DeLubac then compares the efficacy of penance to that of baptism. In penance the social reintegration of the sinner is the prelude to sacramental forgiveness. The double function of the sacrament as a disciplinary institution and as a means of inner cleansing are not simply associated in fact, but are

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<sup>1</sup>H. deLubac, S.J., Catholicism, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard (New York, 1950), pp. 48-49.



united by their nature since they compliment each other within the total act of forgiveness. The liturgy of public penance and pardon in the early Church brought out more clearly than does our private liturgy that the sinner is first reconciled with the Church. This reconciliation then constitutes an efficacious sign of reconciliation with God.<sup>1</sup>

Eduard Schillebeeckx uses a somewhat similar line of reasoning to support reconciliation with the Church. He says that the first effect of all the sacraments is "the establishment of a special relationship to the visible Church." This relationship becomes a sacrament of the bestowal of grace. In penance the first effect is reconciliation with the Church as the sacrament of reconciliation with God in Christ. The sacrament of penance is visible contact with the Church as the earthly manifestation of God's redeeming mercy. It puts sinners in the ecclesial status of penitents who, by performance of the Church's penance and through her merciful absolution, become reconciled with God.<sup>2</sup>

At this point, we will summarize and attempt to answer an important objection to reconciliation with the Church.

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<sup>1</sup> DeLubac, Catholicism, p. 50. He goes on to show (pp. 51-63) the profoundly social nature of the Eucharist. True Eucharistic piety "cannot conceive of the action of the breaking of bread without fraternal communion..." (p. 62).

<sup>2</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, O. P., Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God, trans. Paul Barrett, O. P. (New York, 1963) pp. 174-175. See also these supporters of reconciliation with the Church: Bernard Leeming, S.J., Principles of Sacramental Theology (2d ed., Westminster, Md., 1960) pp. 361-366; F. X. Durrwell, In The Redeeming Christ, p. 75; P. Palmer, Readings in Sacramental, pp. 114-121.

Paul Galtier, a specialist in the history and dogma of penance, cannot accept the priority of the reconciliation with the Church to reconciliation with God. He says that in the early liturgy penitents were reinstated into the Church "because they were presumed to have regained the Holy Spirit through the imposition of hands or to have been cleansed already from sin."<sup>1</sup> Galtier further argues that in the Church today a sinner is not considered justified because he is considered reinstated into the mystical body from which, by sinning, he is said to have gone astray. On the contrary, the sinner is considered restored to the mystical body and to its blessings because he is already justified by absolution. Consequently reinstatement into the Church does not precede justification but follows it.<sup>2</sup>

As mentioned in the footnote earlier, we feel that Galtier has erroneously equated the state of grace or the condition of justification with the reconciliation with God consequent upon the reconciliation with the Church. To view the matter from another standpoint, we think he would affirm that reconciliation with God, the final effect of penance, is the equivalent of the state of grace. Our contention is that the majority of people are in the state of grace when they come to confession. They may have sinned seriously, but as soon as they turn in regret and sorrow from the sin and affirm

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<sup>1</sup>P. Galtier, S.J., De Paenitentia (ed. nova, Rome, 1950), p. 341.

<sup>2</sup>Galtier, De Paenitentia, p. 341.

their love of God, they are again in a situation of filial devotion to the Father, and this is the state of grace.<sup>1</sup> In most cases, all of this precedes a sinner's actual doing of sacramental penance. But for a Christian there is an aspect of full reconciliation with God which becomes possible only through the sacrament. There must be a ratification of the act of sorrow made before penance, a ratification presumed in that act of sorrow. It consists in his avowal to the confessor, the representative of the Christian community and of Christ, that he has acted in contradiction to the Church, the bride of Christ. It further consists in his expression of sorrow, of amendment, and of willingness to submit to the actual penance imposed by the Church. There is then a provisional character to God's extra-sacramental forgiveness of sins. Sacramental penance ratifies the contrition of a Christian; reconciliation with the Church makes possible anew the situation wherein God the Father regards the repentant sinner as in the full sense a member of that community founded by his Son and destined to possess the kingdom of heaven.<sup>2</sup>

The bishops of Holland in the Pastoral Letter mentioned above make a statement which lends support to the above line of

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Rahner, Church and Sacraments, pp. 27-28. "Someone repents of his sins with genuine contrition and conversion, in his own conscience. If he does this, he knows with absolute certainty, by reason of the faithful and irrevocable words of the divine promise, that God truly forgives him his guilt." (p. 27)

<sup>2</sup> Cf. K. Rahner, Church and Sacraments, p. 94.

reasoning:

As a matter of fact, we believe that whenever man, influenced by God's grace, is sorry for his sins, forgiveness is always obtained even before the absolution reserved to private confession is pronounced over him.<sup>1</sup>

St. Thomas Aquinas provides similar support for our contention in answering the question of whether or not a truly penitent person who confesses to a layman in the absence of a priest need confess again sacramentally. He answers:

...hence, although one who confessed to a layman in a moment of danger may have won forgiveness of God...nevertheless he has not been reconciled to the Church, so as to be admitted to the sacraments of the Church, unless he is first absolved by a priest...<sup>2</sup>

Thomas has distinguished the extra-sacramental forgiveness of God from reconciliation with the Church (which means the sacramentum of that fullness of divine forgiveness in the Church which, we contend, is not the equivalent of the state of grace).<sup>3</sup> It is one thing to be justified by perfect contrition outside of penance. It is a completion of this to be reconciled with God through reconciliation with that society which visibly manifests and perpetuates his redemptive grace. In fact, the act of perfect contrition cannot be genuinely made by a Christian without the intention of doing

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<sup>1</sup> = 11

Bishops' Letter, Worship, XL, 278.

<sup>2</sup> 12

Supplementum, q. 8, a. 2, quoted in Leeming, Principles, p. 363.

<sup>3</sup>

<sup>13</sup> It is true, however, that Thomas designated interior penitence as the res et sacramentum of penance (Summa Theologiae, III, q. 84, a. 1, ad 3).



ecclesial penance.<sup>1</sup>

Fr. Schillebeeckx provides a final support for a reply to Gal-  
tier. He points out that in all but two of the sacraments  
(matrimony and orders) desire for them can produce an effect.  
Baptism of desire is the most obvious instance: it cleanses  
from original sin and remits all personal sins. Yet it does  
not impart the character nor (immediately connected with this)  
does it bring about visible incorporation into the Church, nor  
the consequent ability to receive other sacraments. It leaves  
the person a member of the ecclesial community in only a  
limited sense. Thus the effect of baptism of desire is not  
the same effect in an extraordinary manner as sacramental baptism.  
Moreover, since the Church in Christ's plan is the means of  
grace, such a presacramental bestowal of grace is impossible  
without at least an implicit desire for the sacrament.<sup>2</sup>

Although Schillebeeckx does not explicitly do so, the above  
treatment of baptism of desire can be applied to what might  
be termed a penance of desire. Genuine desire for sacramental  
penance produces an effect: God's forgiveness, the return to  
grace. But just as baptism of desire does not bring about  
visible incorporation into the Church, penance of desire does  
not bring about reconciliation with the Church. As the desire

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<sup>1</sup>/ Cf. Leeming, Principles, p. 363: the contrition of one who  
has returned to grace before confession "only avails by reason  
of its relation to the visible Church."

<sup>2</sup>/ Schillebeeckx, Christ the Sacrament, p. 143.

(at least implicit) of sacramental baptism is a requisite for baptism of desire, the intention of doing sacramental penance is a requisite for penance of desire or the act of genuine (perfect) contrition.

Our conclusion, then, is as follows: the equation of the res of penance (sc., reconciliation with God and the corresponding sacramental grace) with the state of grace is invalid. Yet for a Christian the state of grace is only possible in relation to the visible Church. Unless a repentant sinner intends to seek divine forgiveness in its ecclesial dimension, his contrition is not genuine. Reconciliation with the Church is the sacramentum of that full or ratified reconciliation with God which is only possible for the Christian in the societal domain of Christ's Mystical Body.<sup>1</sup>

### C. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PATRISTIC WITNESS

As we approach the patristic doctrine on penance prior to Augustine, the reason for the importance of the Fathers' teaching should be briefly mentioned. They lived at a unique time in Christianity: the age following that of apostolic or "primitive" Christianity. They were the first theologians to comment on Sacred Scripture and come to grips with its problems and its complex richness. But rather than giving simply a commentary on a text or solving a verbal puzzle, they were interpreting the history of God's covenant with the human race.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"...outside the Church the encounter [with Christ] remains implicit or incipient." Schillebeeckx, Christ the Sacrament, p. 145.

<sup>2</sup>DeLubac, p. 96.



Throughout this history they encountered a mystery which was to be fulfilled in a historical and social, yet always spiritual manner: the mystery of Christ and his Church.<sup>1</sup> (Our study of Augustine and his predecessors' thought on penance should bear out the last statement). The Fathers took the germinal theology of the New Testament authors and developed it in light of the living Church of which they were a part. So important is their scriptural exegesis that the Church accepts the "unanimous consent of the Fathers" as infallible faith.<sup>2</sup>

The Fathers, then, link the later Church with its apostolic beginnings. They carry the spirit of "primitive" Christianity into its period of large scale growth in the Roman Empire and elsewhere. By testifying to and elaborating upon the apostolic tradition, they help make possible the development of dogma.<sup>3</sup> With the growth of Christianity, heretical doctrine and moral and pastoral problems were inevitable. The Fathers faced these incipient crises in the young Church, and provided a base from which the Church of later periods could start in facing similar problems. Finally, it should be noted that the Fathers, and even more so one Father, do not present a fully developed picture of the dogma of penance.

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<sup>1</sup>DeLubac, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup>Berthold Altaner, Patrology, trans. Hilda C. Graef, (2d ed.; New York, 1961), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

In the survey now to be presented of patristic teaching on penance before Augustine, an obvious question will be of central importance: to what extent did the pre-Augustinian Fathers emphasize the ecclesial dimension of the sacrament? Poschmann's Penance and the Anointing of the Sick is the principal source for this survey.

D. A SUMMARY OF PENANCE BEFORE AUGUSTINE

First of all, the writings of the post-apostolic era (up to ca. 200) provide little material for a knowledge of the nature of penance. However, the extant material does show a continuum with the New Testament teaching.<sup>1</sup> That teaching had made clear: God's willingness to forgive even grave sins if sincere penance is performed (Luke 15, 24:47; 2 Cor. 7:11); prayer and works of mercy as the means for obtaining remission of sins (Heb. 4:16); the intercession of the faithful and the confession of sins as counterparts of personal prayer (James 5:16); the obligation of Church rulers to admonish obdurate sinners and, if that proved fruitless, to exclude them from the community (Matt. 18:15-17); and the Matthean texts, discussed earlier about "loosing in heaven" (Matt. 16:19 and 18:18).<sup>2</sup>

It was left to the bishop to determine in his own situation the mode of implementing these Gospel principles. Only gradually, as heresies arose or persecutions led to mass apostasy, did

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<sup>1</sup> Poschmann, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp. 18-19; cf. pp. 6-18. The texts cited are only a sampling of New Testament teaching.

the Churches adopt uniform methods for the penitential process.<sup>1</sup>

The post-apostolic teaching was consistent in its affirmation that penance and salvation were possible for all. The prerequisite for this was conversion and the intention of keeping God's law. The Didache (4, 17) prescribes a kind of general, but non-sacramental confession, akin to the Confiteor of the present-day eucharist, as a preparation for "breaking bread" on the Lord's Day.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the Didache also directs that one who has sinned should do penance before drawing near to the eucharistic table (14, 1-2). It is likely that this directive included a personal confession of sins to a Church authority.<sup>3</sup>

The early documents also emphasize such ecclesial aspects of penance as common concern for the salvation of sinners; the obligation of fraternal correction, especially by Church rulers; and excommunication of obstinate sinners.

A passage from a letter of St. Ignatius shows the recognition in this period of readmission into the Church as a guarantee of God's forgiveness:

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<sup>1</sup>

Poschmann, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup>

Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>3</sup>

Poschmann, pp. 24-25. cf. Palmer, Sacraments and Forgiveness (Westminster, Md., 1959), p. 12.

all who are of God and of Jesus Christ  
are with the bishop; all who do penance  
and come into the unity of the Church,<sup>1</sup>  
these also will be of God (Philad. 3,2).

The final document of the post-apostolic era to be discussed is the Shepherd of Hermas. The author devoted considerable attention to penance and to the controversial problems of a single penance. Obsessed with the idea that the end of the world was imminent, he proclaimed that the last possibility of penance was near at hand and that Christians must arouse themselves at once to metanoia.

In a well-known passage of the Shepherd (Commandment 4,3), Hermas is told by the "Shepherd" that ideally the only penance should be the one undergone at baptism, but that the Lord knew man's weakness and mercifully established another penance. The "Shepherd" concludes his instructions by warning that"

after that great and holy calling (of baptism), if anyone is tempted by the devil and sins, he has but one penance. For if anyone should sin and do penance frequently, to such a man his penance will be of no avail; for with difficulty will he live.<sup>2</sup>

The limitations to "one penance" (μία μετάνοια) had a psychological and moral basis. The recidivist by his repeated

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Poschmann, pp. 25-26.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Palmer, Sacraments, p. 14. Fr. Palmer's book is a collection of the basic texts and documents on penance which have shaped and continue to control Catholic teaching. Most of the translations are by the editor.

commission of grave sin manifested the insincerity of his repentance.<sup>1</sup> God's mercy is not denied, but rather the severe difficulty of true repentance by one who persists in a life of sin is stressed. However, this pastoral theory of a single penance grew into a rigid custom during the first few Christian centuries and created a very real problem for the repetitive sinner and the Church.

Concerning the nature of penance, Hermas is in agreement with traditional conceptions such as the necessity of sincere repentance, of expiation for sins, and of acceptance of ecclesiastical penance. He also directs expulsion from the community of those guilty of grave sins, such as apostasy and adultery.

Although explicit information about the ecclesial side of penance is lacking in Hermas, the intervention of the Church is discernible throughout the work and makes the work intelligible.<sup>2</sup> He compares the Church to a tower, the readmission to which is a guarantee of forgiveness of sins. Those sinners who are willing to do penance:

have not been cast aside from the tower  
because they will be of use for its building, should they do penance. (Vision 3.5)<sup>3</sup>

St. Irenaeus, who as a native of the east and a bishop at

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<sup>1</sup> Poschmann, pp. 30-31; cf. Palmer, Sacraments, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Poschmann, pp. 32; cf. Palmer, Sacraments, p. 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Palmer, Sacraments, p. 13.



Lyons united Eastern and Western Church tradition, deserves mention next. Writing in the late second century, Irenaeus states explicitly that God grants peace and friendship to "those who do penance and are converted" (Haer. IV 40, 1); and that eternal fire is prepared for Satan and "all who are impenitently obstinate in heresy" (V 26, 2).<sup>1</sup> In his numerous references to the ecclesiastical side of penance, he states that the presbyters must care for moral discipline in the community by using adminition (correptio) and by imposing excommunication where necessary. Irenaeus employs the term exomologesis (lit., acknowledgment) to denote a lengthy period of penance done under Church control. Although there is no mention in Irenaeus of the reconciliation of penitents, nothing to the contrary exists in his writings. His belief in the efficacy of penance and his stress on the Church's role in salvation, combined with the evidence from the practice of other churches makes it very likely that he also granted reconciliation.<sup>2</sup>

In the latter part of the second century the movement known as Mountanism arose. Regarded initially as simply a revivalist movement, it eventually developed into a rigorist heretical sect. Its penitential doctrine maintained that although the Church through the Holy Spirit may have in principle the power to forgive grave sins, the Spirit ("Paraclete") will no longer

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Poschmann, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Poschmann, pp. 50-51.



forgive them through the Church, lest mildness be an inducement to sin.

Moreover, Montanism undermined the Catholic concept of the Church by claiming that not the bishops but the "new Prophets" were the organs of the Paraclete and the authoritative agents of the Church.<sup>1</sup> In response to this rigorism, Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, wrote to the Churches in Pontus and the Church of Amastria in Bithynia that "all those who are converted from any fall, be it error or even heresy, should be received,"<sup>2</sup>

The Montanist movement reached its peak in Latin Africa under Tertullian, whose doctrine on penance will now be considered. Tertullian's writings both for and against the Catholic doctrine on penance are ample. During his Catholic period (ca. 193-207) he wrote De paenitentia. After becoming a Montanist (ca. 207-220), he wrote De pudicitia, wherein he repudiates his former views, stating that "no one is ashamed of having taken a step forward" (De. pud. 1).<sup>3</sup>

De paenitentia is an urgent call to penance which uses detailed scriptural arguments to assure all sinners that forgiveness is certain if sincere penance is done.<sup>4</sup> The following passage

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<sup>1</sup>Poschmann, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Palmer, Sacraments, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup>Poschmann, p. 30.

from the document embodies many elements of his earlier teaching:

God foresaw these poisons of his (the devil) and, even though the door of forgiveness was closed and made impassible by the bar of baptism, He yet allows it to stand somewhat open. In the Vestibule He has established a second penance which may open to those who knock; but only once, since it is already the second time; but never again, for the next time it will be of no profit. (De paen., 7)<sup>1</sup>

The door leading inside from the vestibule is an image of admission to the Church and was so employed in later patristic writings.<sup>2</sup> Following the restriction of Hermas, Tertullian allows penance only once. But the basis is now not psychological, as in Hermas, but dogmatic.

Tertullian gives a graphic description of the penitential rite. Besides interior sorrow, the outward act of exomologesis was necessary. It consisted of strict bodily penances; a public self-accusation before the congregation, whose intercession was thereby enlisted; and reconciliation which, like excommunication, rested with the bishop.<sup>3</sup>

The final and a very important point in the African's orthodox teaching is presented as follows:

...when you (the sinner) embrace the knees of the brethren, it is Christ you embrace, it is Christ you entreat. In the same way,

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Palmer, Sacraments, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup>Poschmann, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

when they pour forth tears in your behalf, it is Christ who suffers, Christ who implores. What the Son asks is readily and always obtained. (De paen. 10)<sup>1</sup>

There is a kind of sacramental efficacy to the prayer of the Church. Since the Church's prayer is Christ's prayer (and his prayer never goes unheard) then the Church can, on her part, grant forgiveness. Tertullian's reasoning makes him the first writer in the Church to provide a dogmatic basis for the procedure of public penance.<sup>2</sup>

The De pudicitia, on the other hand, is a Montanist polemical work which flatly denies to the Church any power to forgive grave sins. Lesser sins can still be forgiven by ecclesiastical penance, but only God can forgive serious ones. Tertullian bases this restriction on the notion, mentioned in the general remarks above on Montanism, that the Holy Spirit would no longer forgive grave sins.<sup>3</sup> In proposing this distinction between the so-called "remissible" and "irremissible" sins, Tertullian stands alone without support either before or after his time.<sup>4</sup>

As elsewhere in early Christendom, the rigorist attitude had some influence at Rome as manifested by St. Hippolytus. How much it affected his thinking on penance is uncertain. He may

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Palmer, Sacraments, p. 26

<sup>2</sup>Poschmann, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup>See De pud. 21, quoted in Palmer, Sacraments, pp. 30-31

<sup>4</sup>Poschmann, p. 46.

have refused forgiveness to adulterers, and so to idolators and murderers, or may have been content to impose severe, even lifelong, penance.<sup>1</sup> At any rate, Hippolytus admitted in principle forgiveness through the Church. In the prayer for the ordination of a bishop from his Apostolic Tradition God the Father is beseeched,

that by the high-priestly Spirit he [the bishop] may have authority 'to forgive sins' according to thy command...to 'loose every bond' according to the authority thou gavest to the Apostles...(iii, 4).<sup>2</sup>

It is also certain from the writings of the historian Eusebius that in Rome at this time (ca. 215) there was a penitential procedure with reconciliation even for sins as serious as heresy.<sup>3</sup>

The persecution of Christians under the emperor Decius in the mid-third century was the most severe undergone by the Church up to that time. Since many apostasized, questions arose regarding the reconciliation of those who later sought it. Moreover, Novatian, who had earlier advocated a moderate policy towards the lapsed, became the second anti-pope in 251 and caused the Novatianist Schism.<sup>4</sup> This rigorist sect adopted a harsh policy towards the lapsed. In the midst of these controversies, St. Cyprian of Carthage formulated his valuable contributions to the theology of penance.

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<sup>1</sup>Poschmann, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Palmer, Sacraments, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup>Poschmann, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup>Palmer, Sacraments, p. 51.

Cyprian was opposed to the over-hasty concession of reconciliation to penitent apostates which was granted in certain quarters. These relied on "letters of peace" obtained from martyrs as their claim to immediate reconciliation without penitential expiation.<sup>1</sup> Cyprian advocated a middle course between excessive severity and excessive laxity. It is true, however, that his position on readmission of the lapsed advanced more and more in the direction of leniency. This was caused by "the needs of the time" (Ep. 55, 7). A new persecution had broken out in 252 and the bishops of Africa hoped that the lapsed, after reconciliation, would stand firm in the faith during the new crisis.<sup>2</sup> In a letter to Pope Cornelius, Cyprian comments on the decision of the bishops, made at the Second Synod of Carthage, concerning the lapsed:

...he himself [the Lord] has made this concession and has given a law to the effect that what would be bound on earth would be bound in heaven, and on the other hand, that could be loosed there which previously had been loosed here in the Church.<sup>3</sup>

The quotation points up the Church's role in sacramental forgiveness. The words "previously loosed in the Church" lend weight to the arguments used above<sup>4</sup> against Galtier about the priority of reconciliation with the Church to sacramental reconciliation with God. In the same letter, Cyprian writes

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<sup>1</sup>Poschmann, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 56-57; Palmer, Sacraments, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Palmer, Sacraments, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup>Pp. 18-22.



that along with the "peace" of the Church, the penitent receives the "Spirit of the Father." (57, 4.)<sup>1</sup> He says elsewhere that the "priests of God," to whom confession of guilt was made, have to determine the appropriate duration of penance (Ep. 4, 4; 55, 6). When the penance they imposed was completed, the bishop and clergy concluded the exmologesis with the imposition of hands.<sup>2</sup>

Clement and Origen provide the first significant witness for the institution of penance in the Eastern Church. Their doctrine is consistent in essentials with the western tradition. We turn first to Clement, the earlier writer (d. 215).

Clement takes over the doctrine of a second penance, instituted by God because of human frailty, directly from Hermas.<sup>3</sup> As with Hermas, it is limited to a single concession. But Clement goes beyond Hermas in excluding from forgiveness sins of deliberate malice, which presuppose an impenitent state of mind in the sinner rather than any lack of mercy on God's part.<sup>4</sup> In his actual pastoral teaching, he speaks of penance and forgiveness for the adulteress, the heretic, the bandit chief. In the story alledgedly involving a bandit chief and St. John the Apostle, Clement writes that the

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<sup>1</sup>Poschmann, p. 59.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 60-61.

<sup>3</sup>See pp. 26-27 above.

<sup>4</sup>Poschmann, p. 63.

Apostle brought the sinner to repentance and "vied with him in protracted fasts." Moreover,

he [John] did not leave him, so they say, until he had re-established him in the Church, thereby furnishing us with an outstanding example of true repentance... (Quis dives, 42.)<sup>1</sup>

The passage is an indirect proof that Clement, although making no explicit mention of it, adhered to the notion of the reconciliation of penitents with the Church as prior to full reconciliation with God. Moreover, the indispensability for salvation attributed to the Church by Clement is further proof of the existence of that element in his thinking.<sup>2</sup>

Origen succeeded Clement as head of the catechetical school in Alexandria. His doctrine on penance is important, but its subtleties demand careful study. Origen has been accused of rigorism because of the harsh utterances in which he excludes all pardon of sins except that granted in baptism. But the baptismal forgiveness of sins (λαβεῖν ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτημάτων) was one thing in his thinking, and the taking away of sins (ἀπολαμβάνειν τὰ ἁμαρτήματα) after baptism was another. Origen exhorts sinners to do penance so as to obtain the latter (Exhort., ad mort. 30; Comm. series in Matth., 114).<sup>3</sup> He states that penance is the counterpart of the blood of Christ which ransoms us in baptism, but that it is the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Palmer, Sacraments, pp. 22-23

<sup>2</sup> Poschmann, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 66.

penitent himself who brings the ransom (In Exod. hom. 6,9). He compares penance with the death penalty imposed on adulterers in the Old Testament. The death penalty which substituted for punishment in the old law, is replaced in the new by penance through which "forgiveness can be merited" (In Lev. hom. 11, 2).<sup>1</sup>

Origen distinguishes between "sins unto death" such as idolatry, deliberate murder, adultery and the like; and "sins not unto death." For the former, penance is possible, but only once.

The Church's role in penance is evident in Origen's teaching. Since Church rulers are physicians and helpers of the supreme physician, Christ, wounds must be shown not only to God, but also to the priests (In Jo. 37. hom. 1,1). This holds true even for secret grave sins for which Origen likewise prescribes public penance. For Scripture teaches that "sin must not be kept concealed within us" (In Ps. 37. hom. 2,6).<sup>2</sup> In the case of grave sins, the priest must impose the severe correction ( κρίσις correptio ) of excommunication. The sinful deed demands this. Origen depicts the excommunicant as asking himself the question: "How can I still attain to happiness...How can I return to the Church?" (In Ez. hom. 10,1).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Poschmann, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

The duration of the penance should be moderate lest the sinner become dejected and give up. At the same time, Origen teaches that reconciled penitents are Christians of inferior standing who are disqualified from holding any position of authority in the Church (C. Celsum, III, 51). This is the earliest evidence possessed for defamation of penitents.<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note how Church-centered are the seven means for remission of sins which Origen derives from the gospels: baptism, martyrdom, almsdeeds, forgiveness of those who have offended us, the conversion of a sinner, the fullness of love, and lastly ecclesiastical penance (In Lev. hom. 2, 4). Finally, Origen was more interested in the Christian's efforts to become free from sin than in the external sacramental operation. As a result, he emphasized the spiritual physician's work of instruction, correction, and sharing in penitential works along with the penitent under his care. He and Clement, his teacher, are thus regarded as the founders of the practice of extra-sacramental confession which became a general practice in the monastic life.<sup>2</sup>

Origen is the last theologian of major importance in the development of the dogma of penance before Augustine. Consequently, the remainder of our pre-Augustinian survey will touch only a few documents which clearly witness the ecclesial

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<sup>1</sup>Poschmann, pp. 68-69.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

dimension of penance. Augustine's teacher, St. Ambrose, will be the only exception.

The Didascalia is an anti-Novatianist work from Syria dating from the first half of the third century. It gives bishops the following instructions relative to penance:

So it behooves you also to do: to put forth from the Church those who promise to repent of their sins (for a space) proportionate to their offenses: and afterwards do you receive them as merciful fathers...(Didascalia, 6).<sup>1</sup>

Further on, the sacramental efficacy of penance is paralleled to that of baptism:

And as thou [bishop] baptizest a heathen and then receivest him, so also lay hand upon this man, whilst all pray for him, and then bring him in and let him communicate with the Church (Didascalia, 10).<sup>2</sup>

The Church's role in the procedure of penance is evident. Both the bishop and the people have a part to play.

St. Ephrem, also a Syrian, presents an exegesis of John 20:23 which indicates, as did the passage from Cyprian above,<sup>3</sup> that reconciliation with the Church precedes sacramental reconciliation with God:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Palmer, Sacraments, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Poschmann, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Palmer, Readings in Sacramental, p. 115.



...what you shall loose or retain, so shall it be in heaven, nor will I, the Lord, gainsay your words, but in the Spirit speak what is just...your words I shall not undo: if you shall be angry, I too will be angry; if you shall be reconciled [to the sinner], I will be reconciled (Sermon for the Nocturne of the Lord's Resurrection, 6).<sup>1</sup>

The Apostolic Constitutions is a compilation and re-edition of the Church orders by a Syrian writer of the late fourth century which includes a large number of liturgical directives. It instructs the deacon to bid the congregation to "...pray earnestly for our brethern who are engaged in penance..." (VIII,9). Then the bishop, just before the dismissal of the penitents from the Eucharist, was to pray for them as follows:"...do Thou [O God] restore them to the holy Church, to the dignity and honor that was theirs... (VIII, 9).<sup>2</sup> Both the Church's role in penance and God's part are here evidenced.

As a final prelude to Augustine's own view of penance, we will examine Ambrose's ideas. He was influential in Augustine's conversion to Christianity and baptized him in 387.

Ambrose stresses the Holy Spirit's role in penance:

See then that sins are forgiven through the Holy Spirit; but men employ their ministry for the remission of sins;... (On the Holy Spirit III. 18.137).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Palmer, Sacraments, p. 82. Document dated by him ca. 360.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted, Ibid., pp. 73-74.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Palmer, Sacraments, p. 91.

Ambrose also mentions the Church's right both to bind and to loose sins through her priests (On Penance I. 2.7). He directs that one guilty of a grave sin, even if committed in secret,

should seek it [pardon] with tears, seek it on his knees, seek it to the accompaniment of the tears of the whole populace (On Penance, I. 16.90)<sup>1</sup>

As in the Didascalia and the Apostolic Constitutions, the intercession of the community on the sinner's behalf is emphasized here. In accord with the teaching of the earlier Fathers, Ambrose enunciates the rule of a single penance. He declares that if a person truly did penance, he would not think that it could be repeated (On Penance. II. 10.5). The single penance is one which is done publicly for grave sins, not the penance which all do for daily sins. We will notice in Augustine's writings agreement with the following points in Ambrose's doctrine on penance: the role of the Holy Spirit, of the Church and of the community in penance; the rule of a single penance; and the obligation to do public penance even for secret sins of a grave nature.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Palmer, Sacraments, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup>As mentioned above (p. 36), Origen held the same opinion about sins of this sort.

## CHAPTER II

### LITURGY OF PENANCE IN THE CHURCH AT HIPPO

#### A. THE PROCEDURE OF CANONICAL PENANCE

We come next to the liturgy of the sacrament of penance as practiced in the Church at Hippo during Augustine's episcopate. Basically the penitential liturgy of Hippo was quite similar to that of the entire western Church.<sup>1</sup>

In Augustine's thinking there were three kinds of penance practiced by Christians. Sermon 351,<sup>2</sup> De Utilitate Agendae Paenitentiae, I, describes them in some detail. The first is prior to baptism when one must repent of his old life of sin if he wishes to begin a new one (Serm. 351, 42). Only those baptized before reaching the age of reason are exempt (Ibid. 42). As a matter of fact, most persons were baptized in adulthood during this period. The reason for this will be discussed further on in the section dealing with abuses in the penitential system.

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<sup>1</sup>

Josef Jungmann, S.J., The Early Liturgy (Notre Dame, Indiana: 1959), p. 242.

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The authenticity of this sermon is called into question by Eugene Portalie, S.J., A Guide to The Thought of St. Augustine, tr. from the article "Augustine (Saint)" in the Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique by Ralph Bastian, S.J. (Chicago, 1960), p. 76. He cites Erasmus as originally holding it suspect. But there appears to be stronger authority admitting the Sermon's authenticity. Palmer in Sacraments, p. 102; and Poschmann in Florelegium Patristicum (ed. Geyer-Zellinger, Bonn), Vol. 38, 15, n.2 uphold the Sermon. Poschmann maintains that such factors as style, method of setting forth scripture, teaching on faith and morals and type of examples used all point to Augustinian composition. Galtier in L'Eglise et la Remission des Péchés (Paris, 1932) and Paul Anciaux in Le Sacrement de la Pénitence (Paris, 1957) cite the sermon without ever noting that they consider it suspect.

The second type of penance is that which must be humbly undertaken each day since human weakness does not cease to exist at baptism (Ibid., 4,3). In another work Augustine asserts that "Prayer was instituted for venial sins without which we cannot live...; we are cleansed once by baptism, we are cleansed daily by prayer." (De Symb. 7,15)<sup>1</sup>

The third procedure of penance is the sacramental one. It is undertaken for sins which violate the Decalogue. (Serm. 351, 4,7). Sermon 352 provides a comprehensive summary of this penance.

This is a more grave and more mournful penance, and those engaged in it are properly called penitents in the Church. They are even kept from participation in the sacrament of the altar, lest in receiving unworthily they eat and drink unto condemnation. This penance is accordingly the mournful type. There is a serious wound: perhaps adultery has been committed, perhaps homicide, perhaps some act of sacrilege. The matter is grave, bringing about a grave, deadly and death-bearing wound (352,3,8).<sup>2</sup>

Penance of this third sort was called "canonical" because it had gradually come to be strictly regulated by Church canons.<sup>3</sup> The procedure of canonical penance was very involved and consisted of four principal steps: (1) private confession of sins to the bishop; (2) public enrollment by the bishop in the ordo paenitentium; (3) a lengthy period of works of penance and abstention from the sacraments; (4) a solemn public reconciliation of the penitent by the bishop.

#### (1) Private Confession:

Usually it was up to the sinner himself to "personally judge that he deserves so severe a remedy" as canonical penance

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<sup>1</sup> PL, 40, 636.

<sup>2</sup> PL, 39, 1558.

<sup>3</sup> Poschmann, p. 82.

(Serm. 351, 4,9). In some cases, however, a correptio or ecclesiastical correction forbidding reception of the sacraments, would be imposed by Augustine: "Those who know that I am aware of their sins [in this case, adultery] should keep away from communion, so that I need not forbid them entry to the altar rail." (Serm. 392, 5)<sup>1</sup> Only in cases of public scandal (concubinage, apostasy, murder, etc.) did the Bishop of Hippo impose such an exclusion.<sup>2</sup>

The sinner who went to the Bishop was in the first place requesting permission to undertake the canonical penance. This included acknowledgement or confession of the sin. There appears to be no evidence whatsoever in Augustine's writings to indicate that an individual's sins were read out in public.<sup>3</sup> Such a practice had crept into the churches of Campania, Samnium and Picenum near Rome during the pontificate of St. Leo the Great who became Pope in 440, ten years after Augustine's death. Leo sternly condemns the practice (Ep. 168). As for Augustine, there are indirect indications that the congregation never knew anything more than the fact that those sitting in the place of the penitents had sinned gravely. The recurring word "perhaps" (forte) in the quotation from Sermon 352, 3,8 above seems to confirm this.<sup>4</sup> In an address

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<sup>1</sup>PL, 39, 1711.

<sup>2</sup>F. Van der Meer, Augustine the Bishop, trs. Brian Battershaw and G.R. Lamb (New York, 1961) p. 383.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Peter Riga, Sin and Penance (Milwaukee, 1962), p. 94

<sup>4</sup>Oscar D. Watkins, A History of Penance (London, 1920) I, p. 440. See above, p. 42.



to catechumens Augustine explains penitential practice by stating:

For those whom you see doing penance have committed criminal acts, or acts of adultery, or other monstrous deeds (De Symb. 15)<sup>1</sup>

From this passage it appears that the catechumens saw the penitents but had no exact knowledge of the sins they had committed. Had public confession of sins been the rule, Augustine would have stated the matter differently.<sup>2</sup> Finally there is the whole tenor of Sermon 82 which treats of fraternal correction as outlined in Matt. 18:15-17. Here Augustine says "we should rebuke the sinner secretly" (Serm. 82, 8, 11). In the case of a murderer whose offense is known only to Augustine, he remarks, "I certainly wish to give a public rebuke," yet, he continues, "I rebuke him privately ... I urge him to penitence." (Ibid.)

In the same Sermon he states the principle that where a sinner's deed is public knowledge, he should be given a public rebuke (normally when he comes to seek permission to undertake canonical penance.) But if the sin was private so should be the rebuke (8, 10). The Sermon is an indication that sinners did not have to publicly confess the nature of their misdeeds.<sup>3</sup>

## (2). Enrollment in the Order of Penitents.

Augustine had to judge whether the sinner who came and confessed to him needed to undertake the great penance. The precise

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<sup>1</sup>PL, 40, 636.

<sup>2</sup>Watkins, p. 440.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Poschmann, pp. 91-92 and Anciaux, p. 12, n.4.

criteria by which such a judgment was made will be discussed a little further on. But the following norm probably applied in most cases:

And so, if his sin is not only a cause of grave injury to himself, but an occasion of great scandal to others -- and should the bishop judge it expedient for the general well-being of the Church -- let him not refuse to do penance in the sight of many or even of the entire congregation. (Serm. 351, 4,9).<sup>1</sup>

Those who fell into the above category were then enrolled in the ranks of the penitents. They were now part of a distinct class with far-reaching obligations.

### (3). Period of Performing Penance.

The performance of penance, known technically as *exomologesis*, was a complex and burdensome reality. The penitents sat in a special place in the back of the church, the locus paenitentium (Serm. 232, 7,8). Besides abstention from communion, they could not take part in the offertory procession. But the penitents came forward at the conclusion of the Sunday eucharist to take part in a special rite composed of a prayer along with an imposition of hands by the bishop in the presence of the congregation.<sup>2</sup> Although in some areas, such as Spain, a humble penitential garb of goatskin was worn by penitents at Mass, Augustine never mentions it.

The penitents had to perform standard penitential exercises such as prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Moreover in cases of

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<sup>1</sup>Pl, 39, 1545.

<sup>2</sup>Poschmann, p. 89. Cf. Serm. 232, 7, 8: "There are penitents here in great numbers. When the imposition of hands is given them, the line is very long."

very grave sins (crimina damnabilia), the offenders could never enter the clergy (De Correc. Donat., Ep. 185, 45).

The length of the period of penance depended to some extent upon the fervor of the penitent: "The measure of time should not be so much considered as the measure of sorrow." (Enchiridion, 65). Augustine complains in one Sermon that some among the penitents are not repenting of their sins or reforming their lives (Serm. 232, 7). In many cases, especially sins of the flesh, the penitential period was the forty days of Lent.<sup>1</sup> The solemn reconciliation would then take place on Holy Thursday so that the penitents could take part in the Easter mysteries.<sup>2</sup>

#### (4). Solemn Reconciliation

Reconciliation concluded the penitential procedure. The penitents were aware of its necessity because when extreme dangers were imminent, such as the Vandal invasion, they would flock to the church "earnestly demanding reconciliation" (Ep. 228, 8).

The liturgy of reconciliation took place during the Eucharist.<sup>3</sup> After the Gospel, the deacon addressed the bishop and requested him in the name of the penitents to grant them reconciliation. The bishop then spoke to the penitents and warned them against

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<sup>1</sup>Poschmann, pp. 95-96.

<sup>2</sup>Jungmann, pp. 243-244.

<sup>3</sup>The description of reconciliation given here draws considerably on Jungmann, p. 244, whose source is the Gelasian Sacramentary, a Roman book of ritual, the contents of which on penance go back to the sixth century or even earlier.

relapses into sin. Next, the penitents prostrated themselves in front of the bishop's seat and a prayer of supplication was said by the bishop asking God to forgive them and restore them to his holy Church. The penitents now knelt and received the imposition of hands from the bishop. Then he bade the penitents to rise and the ceremony was completed.

Usually, only the bishop was the competent minister of reconciliation. Priests could administer it only as the bishop's delegate and in cases of emergency.<sup>1</sup> But this restriction applied just to solemn reconciliation, and the priests reconciled death bed penitents. Also, penitents in some cases first took a priest into their confidence when seeking admission to penance. He would then make arrangements with the bishop.<sup>2</sup>

#### B. SINS REQUIRING CANONICAL PENANCE

With a description of the penitential liturgy completed, we come to the question of which kinds of sins made canonical penance necessary. Because of the public character of sacramental penance, this was a difficult question for Augustine, the pastor, to answer. One thing was certain: slight sins (venialia or levia peccata) did not require canonical penance but were forgiven by daily works of penance (De Symb. 7, 15; Serm. 351,43). This would explain why there is no record of the fact that Augustine or the other Fathers of the Church ever participated in the

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<sup>1</sup>Canons 7 and 43, Code of Canons of the African Church, reprinted in Watkins, pp. 390-391, from Mansi, Vol. III, 711 and 735.

<sup>2</sup>Poschmann, pp. 97-98.

sacrament of penance.<sup>1</sup>

But it is not easy to see how Augustine distinguished serious sins (crimina) from ordinary ones. The present-day distinction of mortal sins from venial is not adequate, since Augustine exempts all sins of thought (Serm. 98, 5, 5) and certain offenses against fraternal charity (Serm. 82, 3, 5) from the obligation of public penance.<sup>2</sup> Yet he rejects Tertullian's view that public penance was required only for the "triad" of murder, adultery and apostasy (Speculum de S.s. 15, 20 f.).

As mentioned above,<sup>3</sup> Augustine had taught that canonical penance might be required for any sin in the decalogue (Serm. 351, 4, 7). But in practice, he seems to have followed a more lenient view. In the quotation from Sermon 352 above,<sup>4</sup> he uses adultery, homicide and an act of sacrilege as examples of grave sins requiring public penance. In his instruction to Catechumens, the Bishop of Hippo declares that those doing public penance have committed "criminal acts or acts of adultery or other monstrous deeds" (De Symb. 15).

There are three other texts which show rather conclusively that there were mortal sins (in the present-day sense) which did not

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<sup>1</sup>Portalie, p. 262.

<sup>2</sup>Poschmann, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup>P. 42.

<sup>4</sup>P. 42.



require canonical penance. In his treatise De Fide et Operibus, Augustine speaks of two kinds of sins: one type demands "excommunication", the other "certain healing corrections." These two kinds of sins are distinguished from a third type "which cannot be avoided in this life."<sup>1</sup> The text is as follows:

Unless there were certain sins so grave that they must be punished by excommunication [public penance] the Apostle would not say, 'you and my spirit gathered together, to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus' (I Cor. 5:4,5)...Again unless there were certain sins whose cure requires not that humiliation which penitents properly so-called must undergo in the Church, but rather certain healing corrections (quibusdam correptionum medicamentis), the Lord himself would not say: 'Correct him for his fault between you and him alone, and if he will listen to you, you have gained your brother' (Mt. 18:15). Finally unless there were some sins which cannot be avoided in this life, He would not have assigned the daily remedy in the prayer he taught us to say: 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors' (Mt. 6:12) (De Fid. et Op. 26).<sup>2</sup>

Sermon 351 brings out even more explicitly a differentiation between serious sins and extremely serious ones.<sup>3</sup>

And after he [one 'bound by the chains of such deadly sins'] has personally judged that he deserves so severe a remedy...let him come to the bishops who exercise the power of the keys in the Church...let the ministers of the sacraments in due order prescribe the manner in which he is to make satisfaction...and so, if his sin is not only a cause of grave injury to himself, but an occasion of great scandal to

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<sup>1</sup> Portalie, p. 264. Cf. Palmer, Sacraments, pp. 105-106.

<sup>2</sup> PL, 40, 228.

<sup>3</sup> Portalie, p. 264.

others - and should the bishop judge it expedient for the general well-being of the Church - let him not refuse to do penance in the sight of many or even of the whole congregation (Serm. 351, 4, 9).<sup>1</sup>

The minister of the sacrament does not condemn all of those "bound by such deadly sins (Serm. 351, 4,9) to the performance of public penance."<sup>2</sup> But the sinner must come to Augustine at least to receive a "healing correction" (De Fid. et Op., 26) from him. Such a correction may have involved - in addition to admonition and encouragement for the future - abstention from the eucharist for a time.<sup>3</sup> Canon 21 of the somewhat rigorist Council of Elvira in Spain (ca. 305) prescribes that a person who misses mass for three Sundays should be deprived of receiving communion "for a short time". It is rather hard to believe that a Christian at Hippo who failed to attend mass one Sunday or a young person guilty of masturbation would have to undertake public penance. Yet by modern standards these generally are classified as mortal sins.

We come to the third and final text indicating that Augustine distinguished two kinds of serious sins:

...he [the bishop] can with some probability judge those who are not to be forced to undergo the mournful and lamentable penance, even though they have confessed sins, and those to whom no hope of salvation is to be held out unless they shall first offer to God the sacrifice of a spirit afflicted through penance (De Div. Quaes., 83: 9, 26).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> PL, 39, 1545.

<sup>2</sup> Portalie, p. 264.

<sup>3</sup> Palmer, Sacraments, pp. 105-106.

<sup>4</sup> PL, 40, 17.

The sins in question must have been serious since venial faults did not have to be confessed.<sup>1</sup>

C. WAS THERE A PRIVATE PENANCE IN AUGUSTINE'S TIME?

The discussion just completed regarding a distinction in sins of a serious nature, leads into an examination of whether and in what sense a "private penance" existed in the Latin Church of Augustine's time.

All the scholars referred to in this section of the study agree that for serious sins not involving public scandal some lessening of publicity in the penitential procedure was the rule. This modification of publicity certainly influenced admission to penance.<sup>2</sup> In this connection Augustine laid down the principle that

those who have sinned publicly should receive a public rebuke; those who have sinned more in private, should receive a more private rebuke (Serm. 82, 8, 10).<sup>3</sup>

It appears that for public sinners the penitential procedure began with a public rebuke (correptio) or correction and a public enrollment in the ranks of the penitents. This publicity was intended to repair the scandal given by the sinner.

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<sup>1</sup>Portalie, p. 264.

<sup>2</sup>Poschmann, p. 91.

<sup>3</sup>PL, 38, 511. This passage was mentioned above (p. 44) in connection with the question of public confession of specific sins.

But the person who had sinned secretly, though gravely,<sup>1</sup> would undergo the enrollment procedure in private.

Although the scholars agree that the procedure for admission to penance was done in private for private sins, they disagree somewhat on the remainder of the penitential liturgy. Fr. Palmer sees in the writings of the Bishop of Hippo "indications of a private penance." By this he means a penance imposed by a bishop (or priest) which did not entail enrollment in the order of penitents or a distinctive place in the congregation.<sup>2</sup> Fr. Palmer does not use "private" to refer either to the confession of sins (which, as we have shown, was always done privately), or to reconciliation "which may have been public even in the reconciliation of those guilty of lesser sins."<sup>3</sup> He also maintains that one aspect of the penance imposed by the bishop was always abstention for a time from communion.

Fr. Palmer cites two passages from Augustine to support his contention that there existed this "private" and sacramental

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine does not rule out the possibility of canonical penance for secret sins. In the case of married men with concubines, Augustine declares that such men should "do penance as it is done in the Church" (Serm. 392) and not think that since they sinned in secret, they need not beg God's forgiveness in secret. See Watkins, pp. 443-444.

<sup>2</sup> Palmer, Sacraments, p. 105.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

penance at Hippo. The first, cited previously<sup>1</sup> in connection with the question of two kinds of serious sins, speaks of "certain healing corrections" (De Fid. et Op., 26). These are imposed for what we would call "mortal" sins but do not require the humiliation of penance which the penitent properly so-called underwent. The second directs that sinners be corrected (corripiantur) with corrections "more or less severe (vel minoribus vel amplioribus) according to the nature of the sin" (De Correp. et Grat., 15). Fr. Palmer concludes that the correptionibus amplioribus refers to public penance, while the minoribus refers to a private form.<sup>2</sup>

Since the term correptio always in some way relates to the liturgy of penance in Augustine's writings, Fr. Palmer's argument is even more telling.

Portalie concurs with the above when he states that

...everyone guilty of mortal faults must submit himself to (private) confession, the first act of ecclesiastical penance. The minister then imposes "the treatment of complete penance" with public satisfaction for certain graver faults and "private satisfaction" for lesser faults.<sup>3</sup>

Watkins refers to Sermon 351, 4,9<sup>4</sup> which directs that sinners who come to the bishop do public penance only for sins causing

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<sup>1</sup>

Pp. 49-50.

<sup>2</sup>

Palmer, Sacraments, pp. 106-107.

<sup>3</sup>

P. 264.

<sup>4</sup>

Quoted above, pp. 49-50.



grave scandal. He then comments:

It thus appears that the penance assigned by the bishop in cases not notorious might be a private penance which would not subject the penitent to public observation.<sup>1</sup>

Palmer, Portalie and Watkins agree essentially that grave but more or less secret sins demanded only a private admission to penance and, what is more important, private acts of penance. But they are somewhat vague about whether the act of reconciliation by the bishop was public or private. Fr. Palmer says that it "may have been public." Van der Meer, however, does not deal in vagaries when he concludes from Sermons 82<sup>2</sup> and 351<sup>3</sup> that for secret mortal sins (or even partly secret ones) the whole penitential procedure was done privately. Admissions to penance, a homily by the bishop and reconciliation were all done in private.<sup>4</sup> Van der Meer also holds that anyone punished in this way "was accounted as a penitent" and had to abstain from Holy Communion on his own initiative.<sup>5</sup> But perhaps the strongest modern-day proponent of private penance in Augustine is Karl Adam, a contemporary of Poschmann. Adam sought to show that Augustine was the true founder of private penance in the West.<sup>6</sup> He maintained that

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<sup>1</sup> P. 443.

<sup>2</sup> See quotation, p. 51 above.

<sup>3</sup> See quotations, p. 49-50 above.

<sup>4</sup> P. 384.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Poschmann, pp. 85-86, n. 128.

the private penance existed alongside public penance. It was private from beginning to end and had official Church approval just like public penance.<sup>1</sup> Poschmann countered Adam using a line of argumentation which we will now summarize.

Although Poschmann grants that admission to penance and the accompanying correptio were done privately in cases of secret sins, he maintains that "the penance itself is none other than the canonical public penance."<sup>2</sup> The secret sinner had to sit with the other penitents and receive the bishop's blessing at the conclusion of the Sunday eucharist; and, of course, the reconciliation was public. Poschmann cites Augustine's "caustic" comment in Sermon 232 to prove that sitting in the place of the penitents was not very defamatory, and hence that all sinners admitted to penance sat there. The Bishop of Hippo observes that:

....those who after excommunication by me have been brought back to a state of repentance do not wish to rise from there as if the place of the penitents were chosen (by them) (Serm., 232, 7, 8).<sup>3</sup>

Poschmann holds that the public performance of penance could be undertaken for all kinds of sins even for those which people consider not very serious, in particular sins against the sixth commandment. These, he believes, provided the

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Riga, p. 101. Among Adam's works on the subject, some of which were accessible to this writer, the following are especially important: Die kirchl. Sundenvergebung nach dem hl. Augustin (1917); Die geheime Kirchenbusse bei Augustin (1921); an article in Theologische Quartalschrift (1929), pp. 1-66.

<sup>2</sup>p. 92.

<sup>3</sup>

PL, 38, 1111.

principal matter for penance.<sup>1</sup> However, he provides no documentation for this view. Sermon 232 lends some weight at least to his position when Augustine observes:

There are penitents here in great numbers.<sup>2</sup>  
When the imposition of hands is given them,<sup>2</sup>  
there is a very long line. (Serm. 232, 7,8)<sup>3</sup>

Fr. Anciaux sides with Poschmann by his statement that although the avowal of faults was not to be made publicly, the expiation was of a type plus ou moins public.<sup>4</sup>

Fr. Riga agrees with one aspect of Poschmann's view by stating that for all penitents reconciliation was "probably public both in St. Augustine and in other representatives of early tradition."<sup>5</sup> Yet he holds that "the element of satisfaction," could be private.<sup>6</sup> Here he sides with Fr. Palmer et al.

Our own view of this complex question of public and private penance in Augustine leans toward Poschmann's position with certain qualifications. Certainly there was private admission to penance with a private correptio. But the evidence in

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<sup>1</sup>  
pp. 92-93.

<sup>2</sup>  
I.e., the blessing of penitents at the end of Mass.

<sup>3</sup>  
PL, 38, 1111.

<sup>4</sup>  
P. 12, n.4

<sup>5</sup>  
P. 94. . .

<sup>6</sup>  
P. 94.

Sermon 232, 7,8<sup>1</sup> about the large number of penitents present in a special place at Mass points to public satisfaction and public reconciliation. Yet there were undoubtedly special cases, like the murderer whose crime was known only to the bishop (Serm. 82, 8, 11).<sup>2</sup> These demanded a completely private procedure of penance, because in Hippo at this time a man who was presumed to have committed a criminal act was arrested on the slightest rumor and was in every case charged.<sup>3</sup> A penitential procedure which included even a public absolution might lead to a man's arrest. Since such exceptional cases do not appear to have been covered by Church canons,<sup>4</sup> Augustine had to use his pastoral discretion in deciding what to do. This is one reason why it is difficult to accept Adam's view that there was a canonical private penance in the African Church of Augustine.

As hinted at already, many persons must have come to Augustine who had committed, for instance, less serious sins against purity or missed Mass occasionally. They were, in our opinion, simply

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<sup>1</sup> See p. 55 above.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 44 above.

<sup>3</sup> Van der Meer, p. 385, cf. John M.T. Barton, Penance and Absolution (New York, 1961), p. 75.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Watkins, pp. 445-451, where the Canons of the African Church in the time of Augustine are summarized. There is no mention whatever of a penitential procedure to cover special cases of the kind just described.

counseled by him to sin no more, perhaps told to say certain prayers or give alms and made to abstain from communion for a time.<sup>1</sup> The burdensome character of canonical penance and the fact that it could not be repeated - points we shall discuss shortly - lend support to this conclusion.

In conclusion, it must be admitted that there does not seem to exist sufficient evidence for anything more than a scholarly hypothesis on the question of public and private penance in Augustine's time. Since there was not a fully developed sacramental theology at this period in the Church,<sup>2</sup> Augustine and his fellow bishops may never have raised the kind of questions about penance which are of interest to the twentieth century scholar.

#### D. EVALUATION OF THE PENITENTIAL LITURGY

##### (1) Positive Aspects

The liturgy of Canonical penance was profoundly social in nature. The correptio and public or semi-public admission to the order of penitents made the penitent aware from the beginning that his sin had been a detriment to his fellow Christians as well as an offense to his God. Sitting in a special place in the church helped signify the sinner's having alienated himself from the people of God. The public ceremony of reconciliation during the eucharist by Christ's representative, the

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<sup>1</sup>

Cf. Van der Meer, p. 387; and J.N.D. Kelly Early Christian Doctrines (2d ed., New York, 1960), p. 440. See p. 50 above on abstention from communion.

<sup>2</sup>

Cf. Portalie, p. 246.



bishop, was a deeply sacramental act. Everything about it spoke the community's desire to receive the repentant sinner back into its ranks. This in turn made the penitent aware that he was being reconciled to the Three Divine Persons. Sin and forgiveness, then, were placed in their proper social perspective in the fourth and fifth century church at Hippo and elsewhere in the west.

Another very important benefit connected with the penitential liturgy was the support of the faithful. Thus the primary purpose of public penance was not to humiliate the penitent, but to enlist the aid of the Christian community on his behalf.<sup>1</sup> Augustine told those practicing concubinage: "...do penance as it is done in the Church that the Church may pray for you" (Serm. 392, 3). Moreover, the members of the community were to keep watch on the progress of the penitent's conversion, report on it to the bishop and admonish him themselves.<sup>2</sup> During one sermon, Augustine brings before the congregation a soothsayer admitted to penance. He tells his people: "love him with your hearts, watch over him with your eyes" (Enarr. in Ps. 61,23).

## (2) Negative Aspects

The drawbacks in the system stem principally from the rule of a single penance and the defamation of penitents. We have seen how the rule of penitentia una had become by Tertullian's time a dogmatic principle.<sup>3</sup> In a letter to Macedonius, civil governor

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<sup>1</sup> Poschmann, p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> P. 30, above.

of the African Province of Numidia, the Bishop of Hippo states the rule but attempts to explain its meaning:

It is true that the Church has with caution and yet salutarily provided that the place of the lowliest penance be granted only once, lest a medicine that proved worthless should be regarded lightly and hence be of less use to those who are sick. Yet who would dare to say to God: "How can you again spare this man who after his first penance has once more ensnared himself in sin?" ...Since then God's forbearance towards the sinner is so great, as is his mercy...what should men not be towards their fellow man? (Ep. 153, 7,8).<sup>1</sup>

Augustine implies that the Church will not abandon the recidivist after proof of repentance.<sup>2</sup> He likewise upholds both here and earlier in the same passage the mercy of God to forgive even the worst sinner. But the problem was that the recidivist was cut off from the sacramental life of the Church even at the approach of death.

Defamation of penitents arose in part from the public character of canonical penance. The "great public penance of repentance and lamentation," as it was called, was regarded as something which should not normally occur in the life of a Christian.<sup>3</sup> Though the nature of the penitent's offense was never known, the presumption was that it was something quite grave.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, penance debarred one from the clergy:

The Church's prescription that no one, after he has done penance for any crime, shall be admitted to the clergy, or return to the clergy

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<sup>1</sup> CSEL, 44, 403-404.

<sup>2</sup> Palmer, Sacraments, p. 108.

<sup>3</sup> Van der Meer, p. 384. Elsewhere he calls it "a great disgrace" and "an insuperable bar to social intercourse" (p. 383).

<sup>4</sup> Watkins, p. 451.

or remain among the clergy, results not from the denial of pardon but from the rigorous demands of discipline (Ep. 185,45).<sup>1</sup>

The rule of a single penance, the defamation of penitents and, of course, the long and arduous period of expiation gave rise to the abuse of postponing canonical penance until death was imminent because of sickness or a great crisis like the Vandal invasion.<sup>2</sup> A deathbed penance was the equivalent of canonical penance, exactly as if it had been performed before the congregation.<sup>3</sup> Some would postpone penance and take the chance that they would have the opportunity of a reconciliation at the end. Others would enroll in the order of penitents but postpone reconciliation since there was only one opportunity for it.<sup>4</sup> All of these abuses cut off the persons concerned from the sacraments and hardly promoted the true Christian life.

Augustine speaks pointedly about this situation in Sermon 393:

Do penance while you are healthy...If you do so, you are safe. Why safe? Because you did penance when you were still able to sin. But if you wish to do penance when you are no longer able to sin, then your sins have<sup>5</sup> renounced you rather than you renouncing them.

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<sup>1</sup> CSEL, 57, 39.

<sup>2</sup> See Ep. 228,8 and p. 46 above.

<sup>3</sup> Van der Meer, p. 385.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 385-386. Augustine observes that such persons "were unwilling to rise from thence [the locus paenitentiae] as if the status of penitents were something subject to their own choice. Hence what ought to be a place of humility becomes a place of iniquity" (Serm. 232, 7).

<sup>5</sup> PL, 39, 1714.

However, so widespread and tolerated was the practice of deathbed penance that the Church created a special rite of penance for the sick, attested to by the penitential books of the period. The rite compressed the time of penance into a few days.<sup>1</sup>

The stringent nature of canonical penance also contributed to the practice of postponing baptism until the ages of 25-30, so that the baptismal waters would cleanse the sins of youth.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, a considerable proportion of the Christian population belonged to a permanent catechumenate and postponed baptism itself until there was a grave threat to life.<sup>3</sup>

A final abuse connected with canonical penance was that many persons communicated unworthily because their sins were unknown.<sup>4</sup>

Many are corrected as was Peter; many are tolerated as was Judas...For after all we are not able to prohibit anyone from communion...unless the sinner has either confessed on his own or has been named and convicted by a civil or ecclesiastical court judgement. (Serm. 351, 4, 10).<sup>5</sup>

On balance, then, the abuses outweighed the advantages in the penitential praxis at Hippo. Penance acted in some respects as a hindrance to the sacramental life of the people. Yet by it sin and repentance were seen more clearly in their true social perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> Jungmann, p. 247.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 248. He notes that Augustine was not baptized until age 33, although he became a catechumen as a child.

<sup>3</sup> Watkins, p. 451. See again PL 228, 8 and p. 46 above.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> PL, 39, 1546.

# CHAPTER III

## AUGUSTINE'S NOTION OF PENANCE AND RWC

### A. THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF AUGUSTINE

If we are to answer accurately the question posed earlier<sup>1</sup> regarding the significance of reconciliation with the Church in Augustine's teaching on penance, then a preliminary study of his ecclesiology must be undertaken. The great contribution which he made in this area was chiefly prompted by the Donatist schism which swept North Africa during the fourth century. When Augustine arrived at Hippo in 391 to begin his priestly career, "the town was wholly in the hands of the pars Donati."<sup>2</sup> This counter-Church was to be the great cross of his life.

The Donatists claimed that the true church could only consist of the sinless. They therefore held that the validity of the sacraments depended upon the purity of the ministrant. In fact, the schism had started when a group of Numidian bishops refused to recognize the episcopal consecration of Caecilianus, bishop of Carthage. They claimed (falsely) that Caecilianus' consecrator, Felix of Aptunga, had made his own orders invalid by temporarily yielding during the Diocletian persecution. The Donatists rebaptized all who had undergone baptism by the existing hierarchy, and consecrated an unspotted hierarchy of their own.<sup>3</sup> Against the Donatists Augustine wrote a number of

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<sup>1</sup> P. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Van der Meer, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 79-80.



works, among them his famous treatise On Baptism Against the Donatists. Therein he developed the principle that "neither faith nor probity of life is required of the minister."<sup>1</sup> Later in the chapter we will see how this related to Augustine's theology of penance.

Augustine's ecclesiology, to begin with, affirmed that the Church is a visible organization. It has a hierarchy called praepositi who are at the head of the Christian community and fulfill the functions of administering the sacraments and preaching the word of God. The term designates bishops as well as the other members of the clerical state.<sup>2</sup> The Bishop of Hippo compares their role to that of Noe:

...in Noe the good praepositi are symbolized who rule and guide the Church just as Noe, during the flood, guided the ark. (De Urbis Excidio, 1, 1).<sup>3</sup>

The Church is also visible because it consists of visible members united by external bonds. Chief among these bonds are the sacraments:

Men cannot be brought to unit in the name of any religion, be it true or false, unless they are brought together by the communion of visible signs or sacraments (C. Faustum Manich. 19, 11).<sup>4</sup>

Our Lord...collected a society of new people by means of sacraments which are few in number, easy of observance and excelling in significance (Ep. 54,1,1).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Palmer, Sacraments, p. 96

<sup>2</sup> Stanislaus J. Grabowski, The Church: An Introduction to the Theology of St. Augustine (St. Louis, 1957), pp. 100-101.

<sup>3</sup> PL, 40, 717.

<sup>4</sup> CSEL, 25, 510. Another important bond, according to Augustine, is external profession of the same faith.

<sup>5</sup> CSEL, 24, 150.

Hence the sacraments give her visible character to the Church, and, in a sense, build her up externally.<sup>1</sup> Yet they also give the Church her internal unity since they are indispensable for eternal salvation and are not to be found outside of her:

The effect of these sacraments is indescribably great and to treat them contemptuously is to be guilty of sacrilege. For to despise what is indispensable for complete union with God is to become godless (C. Faustum Manich, 19, 11).<sup>2</sup>

It should be noted at this point that the term "sacrament" had a variety of meanings besides the rites now associated with the word.<sup>3</sup> Augustine used the term to designate any sacred external and visible sign having a relationship to God which, through its performance, causes an invisible and internal effect in the soul of man.<sup>4</sup>

Having already mentioned that the sacraments give internal unity to the Church, we now turn specifically to Augustine's teaching on the Church as the Body of Christ, as an invisible and spiritual organization. The sacrament which most especially makes possible this spiritual unity in Christ's Body is, of course, the eucharist:

The eucharist is our daily bread; and our power for good, which is shown forth therein, is unity, that is to say, that we are made into his own body; and having been made into his body, we ourselves become what we receive (Serm. 57, 7).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Van der Meer, p. 282.

<sup>2</sup> CSEL, 25, 510.

<sup>3</sup> Grabowski, p. 176.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 176-177.

<sup>5</sup> PL, 38, 389.

It was under the influence of St. Paul that Augustine so strongly emphasized the idea that the Church is the body of Christ (Corpus Christi).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the union of the faithful with Christ in forming his Church is something "sublime, divine, and mysterious" (C. Faustum Manich. 21,8). Christ is the head of the Church, with all of whose members he constitutes one unit, one whole, one person (Serm. 1,1).<sup>2</sup> Because Christ was ordained from eternity to be a mediator and to have members, he and his members constitute the complete Christ.<sup>3</sup> This complete Christ, Head and members, perpetuates the saving work begun by the Head at his Incarnation.

With this summary of the visible and invisible constitution of the Church completed, we can now focus our attention on the place of the Holy Spirit in the Church. This consideration of the Spirit in the Church is perhaps the most vital preamble to an understanding of Augustine's doctrine on penance and reconciliation with the Church.

The Bishop of Hippo teaches that the Holy Spirit is the soul of the body of Christ, the Church:

And so do you too wish to live from the  
Spirit of Christ? Be in the body of Christ  
...The body of Christ cannot live except

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine does not use the term "mystical" in connection with "Body of Christ." Although he sometimes uses Corpus Christi to denote the eucharist, the term is used far more often to mean the Church. Almost habitually Augustine adds "the Church" in apposition to "the body of Christ." Grabowski, pp. 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> See Grabowski, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.11.

from the Spirit of Christ (In Jo. Evang. 26,13).<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the multitude of the faithful from every race and nation are united by the one spirit:

He who has created us is the one God, he who has redeemed us is the one Christ, he who should draw us together is the one Spirit (Ad Donat. Post Coll 35, 38).<sup>2</sup>

The gift of the grace of God is above all else the gift of the Uncreated Grace, the Holy Spirit:

Certainly, the grace of God is the gift of God. But the greatest gift is the Holy Spirit himself; and so he is called grace (Serm. 144, 1,1).<sup>3</sup>

The question which now arises is this: What place can sinners have in the body of Christ since they have rejected the Spirit of Christ? The Augustinian principle which provides an answer is that all those who adhere to the external or visible unity of the organizational church adhere also to the unity of Christ's body even if they are dead by reason of sin.<sup>4</sup> The principle is illustrated by the following quotation wherein Augustine also teaches the radical separation of heretics from the Church:

...during this entire time since he [Christ] has risen and been with his Father, he has suffered from the commingling of sinners in his body, which is the Church, and from the separation of heretics (Enarr. in Ps. 88, 26).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> CSCC, 36, 266.

<sup>2</sup> PL, 43, 690.

<sup>3</sup> PL, 38, 788.

<sup>4</sup> Grabowski, p. 564.

<sup>5</sup> CC, 40, 2008.

The position of the good and the bad coexisting in the body of Christ is not one of identity but of contrast. Augustine makes it clear in his writings that only the good are members to such an extent as to be unequivocally in the body of Christ and as to be the formative substance of it. The union of the good with the body of Christ is intrinsic by means of inner, lifegiving bonds. In the case of the wicked, their adherence to it is voluntary but external. They are members of Christ's body, the Church, by virtue of being in unity with it; but they are dead members (putre membrum; In Jo. Evang., 26, 13).<sup>1</sup> Augustine compares the virtuous faithful to the woman in Luke 8:44-48 who touched Christ. The wicked are the crowd in the same Gospel incident who pressed upon (and oppressed) Christ.<sup>2</sup> Sinners, then, belong only imperfectly to the body of Christ, and "They are not to be considered as wholly belonging to the Church" (De Bap. c. Donat. IV, 3,4).

#### B. THE HOLY SPIRIT AND FORGIVENESS OF SINS

Just as serious sin involves the loss of the life-giving Spirit, forgiveness of sin involves the return of the Spirit. In fact, Augustine teaches that it is through the Holy Spirit that sins are forgiven:

It is against this gratuitous gift, against this grace of God that the impenitent heart speaks. Impenitence itself is then blasphemy of the Spirit which finds remission neither in this life nor in the next.

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<sup>1</sup> Grabowski, pp. 564-565, 569, n. 241.

<sup>2</sup> Serm. 3,1 (PL, 38, 32 ).



It is against the Holy Spirit in whom they are baptized, through whom all sins are forgiven, and whom the Church has received in such a way that the person she forgives it is forgiven him, that the utterly malicious and impious word is either conceived by the mind or even expressed by the tongue (Serm. 71, 12, 20).<sup>1</sup> ... since sins are not remitted outside the Church, it was fitting that they be forgiven in that Spirit by whom the Church is gathered together into a unity (Ibid., 17, 28).<sup>2</sup>

Impenitence is diametrically opposed to the action of the Spirit and the Spirit is the life force through whom the Church forgives sin. Hence impenitence makes forgiveness of sins impossible. A question naturally arises about the relationship of the Holy Spirit to Christ in the forgiveness of sins. In the Enchiridion Augustine indicates the inter-relationship of Christ, his Spirit and his Church by writing:

But the man who does not believe that sins are forgiven in the Church and therefore scorns this great largess of divine bounty and ends his days in such obstinacy of heart, is guilty of the unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit, through whom Christ forgives sins (Enchiridion 83).<sup>3</sup>

The Spirit of Christ is only given through the Church which received him as her source of life at Pentecost. The sinner must be reconciled with the Church to live again fully in the Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> PL, 38, 455. Translated by Palmer in Sacraments, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> PL, 38, 460. Translated ibid.

<sup>3</sup> PL, 40, 272. Translated by Louis A. Arand, S.S. in Ancient Christian Writers, (Westminster, Md., 1947), vol. 3, p. 82.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Palmer, Sacraments, p. 96.

In another of his works, Augustine again relates the Holy Spirit to the Church's mission of cutting off sinners from her life and of reconciling them when they have repented:

The fact that the Holy Spirit is given alone through the imposition of hands, our Fathers wished to be understood as an application of what the Apostle says: 'Now the charity of God is diffused in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who is given to us' (Rom. 5:5). For this is that charity which they do not possess who are cut off from communion with the Catholic Church...(De Bap. c. Donat. III, 16, 21).<sup>1</sup>

The statement is actually directed against the Donatists who, as a group, were bereft of the Spirit because of their break with Catholicism. But the remark also has relevance for the sinner who has been "excommunicated"<sup>2</sup> by enrollment in the order of penitents, and who can only return to full life in the Spirit through sacramental reconciliation.

Another excerpt from On Baptism Against the Donatists will serve to summarize this section on the Holy Spirit and will introduce Section "C" on the collectivity of the power of the keys. Augustine is commenting on Jesus' words to the Apostles after his resurrection:

Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained (Jn. 20:22).

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<sup>1</sup>  
CSEL, 51, 212 .

<sup>2</sup>  
Enrollment in the order of penitents was considered by Augustine a kind of excommunication. But he distinguishes it from a radical and complete excommunication comparable to our modern day practice. See Quaest XVIII in Matt. q. 11, 3. Cf. Portalie, p. 242.

The Bishop of Hippo then observes:

Therefore, if the Apostle represented the person of the Church itself, it follows that the peace of the Church remits sins and separation from the Church's peace retains sins... for the rock retains, the rock remits; the dove retains, the dove remits; the unity retains, the unity remits...(De Bap. c. Donat. III, 18, 23).<sup>1</sup>

Again Augustine closely identifies the Church ("rock," "unity") with the Spirit ("dove") in the forgiveness of sins. He points out that the Church's peace is necessary for forgiveness from God, and he states that the Apostles represent the whole Church in their mission to retain and forgive (or bind and loose) sins. The Church as a whole received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The sinner has offended the whole people of God and must be reconciled to them if he wishes to live again in the Holy Spirit of God.

We can now take up in detail this question of Christ's radical gift of the Spirit to the entire Church.

C. THE COLLECTIVITY OF THE POWER OF BINDING AND LOOSING

Augustine indicates in statements like the following that the whole Church, the whole people of God, possesses radically the power to bind and loose sinners because of their radical possession of the Holy Spirit:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>

CSEL, 51, 214-215.

<sup>2</sup>

Poschmann, p. 103.

...not he [Peter] alone, but the entire Church binds and looses sins (In. Jo. Evang. 124, 7).<sup>1</sup>

In one of his sermons, the African Bishop discusses the same question with direct reference to the Spirit. After stating that God and the Holy Spirit are one, he asks his congregation:

But what is your relationship to the Spirit? 'Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?' [1 Cor. 3:16]. And again, 'Do you not know that your bodies (corpora vestra) are a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?' [Ibid., 6:19.] And so, God dwells in his holy temple, that is, in his holy faithful, in his Church: through them he forgives sins because they are living temples (Serm. 99, 9).<sup>2</sup>

God's gift of the Spirit is a gift to the entire people of God, those whom Augustine called the sancti fideles. As a result, the entire Christian community is involved in the process of "binding" and "loosing" sinful members.

Another quotation will serve to bring out even more conclusively Augustine's teaching on the community's power to bind and loose. This important excerpt for Sermon 295 presents a kind of capsule biblical theology of penance by Augustine:

Among these [the Apostles] Peter alone almost everywhere merited to portray the person of the entire Church. Because he portrayed the very person of the entire Church, he merited to hear: 'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven' [Matt. 16:19]. Not one man but the unity of the Church received these keys. And hence the magnificent words said to Peter, 'I give to you,' were said to him as he portrayed the figure of the very universality and unity of the Church. For the keys were given

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<sup>1</sup> CC, 36, 687.

<sup>2</sup> PL, 38, 600.

to everyone. In order to know that the Church received the keys of the kingdom of heaven, listen to what the Lord says to all of his Apostles in another place: 'Receive the Holy Spirit,' and then immediately, 'If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven him; if you retain the sins of anyone, they are retained' [Jn. 20:22-23]. This passage is related to the one on the keys where it states: 'Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed also in heaven; and whatever you bind on earth, shall be bound also in heaven' [Matt. 16:19]. But he said this to Peter. So as to realize that Peter was then portraying the person of the entire Church, listen to what is said to him and what is said to all the holy faithful: 'If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the Church; and if he refuses to listen even to the Church, let him be to you as a gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven [Matt. 18:15-18]. The dove binds, the dove looses; the building upon the rock (petram) binds and it looses (Serm. 295, 2).<sup>1</sup>

The quotation speaks for itself. The Bishop of Hippo has shown the inter-relationship of: (1) the words of Christ addressed to Peter alone about receiving the keys and binding and loosing (Matt. 16:19); (2) his words to all the disciples about forgiving sins and retaining them (Jn. 20:23); (3) and his words about fraternal correction where the local congregation (Gk., ἐκκλησία) has authority to cut off the sinner from its life (Matt. 18:15-18).

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<sup>1</sup>  
PL, 38, 1349.



For Augustine, then, reconciliation with the Church<sup>1</sup> does not mean reconciliation simply with the hierarchical Church. Even more, reconciliation with the Church means the new-found peace which the sinner enjoys with all of those who possess the Holy Spirit and who now welcome the sinner back into the fellowship of the Son of God (cf. 1 Cor. 1:9). As we shall see in Section "D", "The Lazarus Parallel," those with holy orders fulfill the ministry of sacramental forgiveness of sins. But they do so on behalf of the entire Church (universa ecclesia: In Jo. Evang. 124,7). The end result of the whole process is, of course, that "full or ratified reconciliation with God" which we discussed earlier.<sup>2</sup>

The profoundly communal aspects in the liturgy of penance at Hippo described above,<sup>3</sup> show clearly that Augustine applied the theory of the collective nature of the power to bind and loose to the penitential praxis of his own community. The public correptio sometimes given to a flagrant sinner, the publicity

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Augustine comes quite close to the wording of the technical expression, reconciliation with the Church, in a quotation already cited (P. 71) where a portion of the Latin text reads: Pax ecclesiae demittit peccata et ab ecclesiae pace alienatio tenet peccata (De. Bap. c. Donat. III, 18, 23). Moreover, in Epistle 228, 8, Augustine observes that when extreme dangers to life are imminent, the faithful rush to the Church, "some demanding baptism, others reconciliation (reconciliationem)..." The reconciliation is that given to those in the order of penitents through the laying on of hands or absolution, Palmer, Sacraments, p. 99.

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Pp. 18-22.

3

Pp. 42-46.

entailed in the performance of penance and the public ceremony of reconciliation all bear out this conclusion. In the following quotation, Augustine again emphasizes the social dimension of sin and reconciliation and appeals to the practice of St. Paul by writing:

It may not seem fitting that they [the wicked] be accused or uncovered by others who are good, or perhaps they cannot be shown [their evil] by these good people. Truly, then, since the vigilance of correction does not quiet them, they will be quieted by correction, degradation, excommunication<sup>1</sup> and other licit and ordinary checks which take place in the Church according to the precept of the Apostle who said in an attempt to safeguard charity: 'If anyone refuses to obey what we say in this letter, note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not look on him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother' (2 Thess. 3:14-15). (Ad Donat. post Coll., 4,6)<sup>2</sup>

D. THE LAZARUS PARALLEL (The Role of God and of the Church in the Forgiveness of Sins)

The means which Augustine uses most often to illustrate the respective roles of God and of the Church in the forgiveness of sins is the so-called "Lazarus parallel."<sup>3</sup> Although contemporary biblical scholars have difficulties with the allegorical interpretation of Scripture which the great African Father employs here, his theology is sound even without the scriptural wrapping. The following excerpt is a very clear example of the Lazarus parallel:

'The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him;'  
(Prov. 5:22) and outside the Church nothing  
is loosed. To a man dead four days the words

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<sup>1</sup> See p. 70 above.

<sup>2</sup> CSEL, 53, 103-104.

<sup>3</sup> Palmer, Sacraments, p. 100. See Jn. 11:1-44 for the account of Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead.

'Lazarus, come forth' were spoken. And he came forth from the tomb, his hands and feet bound with bandages. The Lord summons the dead man to come forth from the tomb, and the sinner, whose heart has been touched, to come forth by his confession of sin.<sup>1</sup> But he is still bound a little (parum). And so the Lord, after Lazarus had come out of the tomb, said to his disciples (to whom he had already said, 'whatsoever you loose on earth, shall be loosed also in heaven'): 'loose him and let him go.' Lazarus is summoned forth by him and loosed by his disciples. (Serm. 295, 2)<sup>2</sup>

Lazarus is compared with a sinner. Both are dead until the grace of Christ calls out to them. Yet even after "coming forth," both are "bound." As the disciples<sup>3</sup> loosed Lazarus from his bandages, they must loose the sinner from his guilt.

Interestingly enough, this passage occurs almost immediately after the excerpt from the same Sermon quoted on pp. 72-73 above. There Augustine had shown that the entire Church possessed radically the power of binding and loosing sinners:

Has enim claves non homo unus, sed unitas accepit Ecclesiae.

Here he indicates that the grace of God initiates the process of repentance and forgiveness.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine is undoubtedly referring to the private confession of sins to the bishop which was the first step in the liturgy of public penance.

<sup>2</sup> PL, 38, 1349-1350.

<sup>3</sup> Augustine assumes that the disciples loosed Lazarus, but the text of Jn. 11:44 simply reads, "Jesus said to them, 'unbind him and let him go.'"

<sup>4</sup> In another work employing the Lazarus parallel, Augustine writes: "Now God disposes you to confess, crying out with a loud voice, that is, calling with a great grace." (In Jo. Evang. 49, 24). Cf. Palmer, Sacraments, p. 100.

Another clear example of the Lazarus parallel is the following:

When you hear that man has repented of his sins, he has already come back to life. When you hear that a man by confessing has revealed his conscience, he has already been lead out of the sepulchre. But he has not yet been unbound. When will he be unbound and by whom? Whatever you loose on earth, he said, shall be loosed also in heaven. The loosing of sins can justly be imparted through the church. However, the dead man himself cannot come back to life unless the Lord shouts from within. For God brings these things about in a very interior way. (Enarr. in Ps. CI, Serm. II,3).<sup>1</sup>

The "interior" action of God, the Lord's "shouting from within," enabled the sinner to go to the bishop and confess his sins. He then began the Church-directed performance of penance which terminated in public absolution. This was the "loosing on earth" which made possible "loosing in heaven."

Two other instances of the Lazarus parallel show the indispensibility of loosing by the Church from the standpoint of loosing the sinner from the guilt (reatus) of his sins:

When you despise [the Gospel], you lie dead; when you despise the things about which I preach, you lie buried. When you confess, you come forth. . . And so when the dead man came forth still bound, confessing and yet still guilty (reus), the Lord - so as to loose his sins - said to his ministers: Loose him and let him go. What does Loose, and let go mean? Whatever you loose on earth, shall be loosed also in heaven. (In Jo. Evang. 49,24)<sup>2</sup>

In the second excerpt Augustine is again describing the conversion of sinners:

. . . they have come back to life by their own displeasure at what they have done: but even though living again, they are unable to walk. The chains of guilt itself are the cause.

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<sup>1</sup> CC, 40, 1440.

<sup>2</sup> CC, 36, 431.



It is necessary, therefore, that he who has come back to life be loosed and permitted to go free. He gave the office to his disciples to whom he said 'whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed also in heaven.' (Serm. 98, 6)<sup>1</sup>

Even though God in some sense brought the sinner back to spiritual life, and even though the sinner "comes forth" by his confession of sins, he is still bound by the "chains of guilt itself." It is necessary that the "ministers"<sup>2</sup> of the Church exercise the sacramental power of loosing the sinner from his guilt. In this way he can walk about freely, for he has been loosed also in heaven. We observed above that "in some sense" God brought the sinner back to life. It appears that Augustine did not mean by such statements that the individual's repentance was so complete that he was pardoned from his guilt before the performance of public penance and absolution. He was probably thinking of what we would describe as the actual grace of compunction which initiates the process of repentance and of submission to the power of the keys.<sup>3</sup> Augustine, then, sees the sinner as "guilty" or "bound" before God until he is loosed by the ministers of the Church. Only through the pax ecclesiae were grave sins forgiven.

As a final substantiation for affirming that the Church has an indispensable role in the forgiveness of sins, we cite Sermon 125 from the African Bishop's Sermons for May:

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<sup>1</sup> PL, 38, 595.

<sup>2</sup> In Sermon 352,8, Augustine states that after the sinner is re-awakened to repentance by the Lord, "the ministry of the Church" then fulfills the task of loosing the sinner and setting him free.

<sup>3</sup> Palmer, Sacraments, p. 101, n.1.



He whose voice reaches the heart calls out: 'Lazarus come forth!' that is, live, come out from the sepulchre, change your life, put an end to death. And the dead man comes forth, bound with burial clothes: because even though he has quit sin, he is still guilty (reus) of past sins; and there is need that he pray and do penance for what he has done; not because of what he does, since he no longer does them; but, because of what he did, he is still bound. Therefore, to the ministers of his Church, by whom the hand is laid upon penitents, Christ said: 'Loose him and let him go.'<sup>1</sup>

The guilt of past sins is not removed until the ministers of the Church lay hands upon or absolve the penitents at the conclusion of the liturgy of public penance.

It should be mentioned in passing that Augustine places considerable emphasis in the Lazarus parallel on the private confession of sins to the bishop.<sup>2</sup> Through this action the sinner "comes forth" from the tomb, even though he is still bound. It is the first step in the sinner's return to peace with the Church and, thereby, with God.

One more notion should be discussed before concluding the present section. Although it is not an instance of the Lazarus parallel, it does involve the Church's role in the forgiveness of sins. In his Enchiridion, Augustine writes as follows:

Those who have charge of the Churches with good reason assign periods of penance so that satisfaction may also be made to the Church. In her sins are forgiven; outside of her they are by all means not forgiven. She herself received the pledge

<sup>1</sup>

Translated by Palmer in Sacraments, p. 101. For additional examples of the Lazarus parallel see: Serm. 67, 2-3 and In Jo. Evang. 22, 7.

<sup>2</sup>

E. Amann, "Penitence-Sacrament," Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique XII, 1(1933), col. 811. For instances, see the quotations on pp. 68-69 and 70, above.

of the Holy Spirit, without whom no sins  
whatever are forgiven, so those whose sins  
are forgiven gain eternal life. (Enchiridion,  
65)<sup>1</sup>

Satisfaction for sin must be made to the Church as well as to God. Consequently, the bishops are empowered to assign periods of penance depending upon the gravity of the sin. The idea of sin as an offense against the people of God was mentioned in connection with our evaluation of the penitential liturgy in Augustine's time.<sup>2</sup> Here the Bishop of Hippo clearly states the idea. He then gives its theological basis: the Church has received the Holy Spirit as her source of the Christ-life; only in the Spirit and hence in the Church are sins forgiven. The quotation is really a summary of Augustine's whole thought on penance and reconciliation with the Church.

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<sup>1</sup>  
PL, 40, 262.

<sup>2</sup>  
P. 49 above.

CHAPTER IV  
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As our patristic survey has shown, the Fathers of the Church, prior to Augustine, give ample testimony to the ecclesial dimension of sin and forgiveness. Ignatius, for example, teaches that those who do penance and come into the Church's unity will be of God.<sup>1</sup> Cyprian makes it clear that loosing in heaven takes place through a previous loosing on earth by the Church.<sup>2</sup> Origen stresses the necessity of returning to the Church to attain eternal happiness.<sup>3</sup> Finally, Ephrem gives the clearest possible formulation of the priority of reconciliation with the Church to full reconciliation with God by picturing the Lord as saying that if the Church reconciles a sinner, he will likewise do so.<sup>4</sup>

Augustine follows this patristic tradition and amplifies it. Through both the liturgical practice of his Church at Hippo and the underlying theory found in his writings, he clearly indicates that sin and forgiveness are ecclesial realities. He further indicates that loosing on earth through absolution enables the sinner to be reconciled with the Church and thereby to be loosed in heaven. The Church is a society which possesses the Holy Spirit and lives in the Spirit. Moreover, the power to bind and loose sinners is possessed by the entire Christian community because of the radical possession of the Holy Spirit. The ministers of the

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<sup>1</sup> See pp.25-26 above.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.33.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.36.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.38-39.

Church act on behalf of the Christian people by directing the penitential liturgy. By the public laying on of hands, they sacramentally return the penitent to peace with the Church. We feel, then, that we have answered the essential question posed in the following terms at the beginning of this study: "What did it mean to Augustine for a penitent to be reconciled with the Church?" To be thus reconciled meant for him to be restored to peace with the body of Christ, the community of the Spirit, and in this way to be loosed entirely from the bonds of alienation or guilt (reatus) before God.

The experiments with communal penance services discussed in Chapter I are, as we have said, attempts to restore to the contemporary practice of sacramental penance a deeper awareness of the social implications of sin. These services restore the ecclesial and social dimension to penance and balance the individual dimension. Through appropriate scripture readings and the homily, they help to make those attending aware of their obligation to pray for each other and for sinners in general. These services also restore the aspect of liturgical worship to the sacrament of penance, and signify the joy and peace which should result from repentance and renewed life in the Spirit.

Clearly, the doctrine of the Bishop of Hippo regarding sin and penance is a strong argument for the continued and expanded practice of communal penance services, and for revisions in the rite and formula of penance which might help restore the ecclesial dimension to the sacrament.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Augustine's

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<sup>1</sup> See the discussion of these points, pp. 1-7 above.

doctrine lends strong support to the position that reconciliation with the Church is the res et sacramentum of penance. The doctrine of the other Church Fathers we have studied lends similar support.

The Church on earth is at once a community of sinners and a community called to holiness. It is a community ever in need of metanoia. In the sacrament of penance, the Church together with her Head enables her sinful members to grow in holiness through an awareness of God's mercy, their own need of divine healing and the detriment to self and neighbor inherent in sin. In this sacrament, the "power" of Christ "is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor. 12:9).



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