

RENEWAL OF PENANCE AND THE PROBLEM OF GOD

Good medical practice can serve as a useful analogue in an attempt to describe the qualities that are called for in efforts to renew the sacrament of penance today.¹ The theological debate and liturgical experimentation presently under way must be conducted with at least a corresponding degree of painstaking seriousness, for basic religious values are at stake. The result of a hit-and-miss approach would likely be widespread indifference or even disdain on the part of a public that takes scientific procedure for granted in more and more areas of human endeavor. And the casualty in such an event might well turn out to be the conversion that is at the heart of Christian life. To avoid this, present needs require assessment they are not receiving in the dispute over the private or communal character of confession and absolution.

PRESENT DIAGNOSIS: METHODOLOGICAL PREOCCUPATIONS

The normative character of their Church's penitential experience from the past is a source of division among Roman Catholics. It is, in fact, a major point of dispute, if one that is not always explicitly acknowledged.² Only with this in mind will one understand how the more fundamental issue of credibility could be ignored in the process.

For not a few Catholic theologians, decisions of the conciliar and papal magisterium regarding penance have proved decisive. Integral confession of serious sins is held to be a matter of divine law for the baptized because it was asserted to be such in the canons of Trent. Such a position frequently amounts to prejudging certain cases of general absolution even before they are posed as problematic.³ The decisive principle involved here is clear enough. The words of Jesus, the apostolic preaching, and Scripture can claim to be unique, since they mediate God's own revelation. Being what they are and not the creation of a culture, they can survive and at times profit from cultural change. Conciliar definitions of the faith are of like condition, given

¹ Man can achieve a limited but fruitful understanding of the mysteries God has revealed; one way is through analogues from experience (*DS* 3016). As is the case with the sacrament itself, the process of renewing penance calls for such a model.

² Richard McCormick has pointed out that the central character of this issue has not received much notice from contemporary writers; cf. "Notes on Moral Theology," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 28 (1967) 769-76.

³ For a strong proponent of such a theological approach, cf. Francis Connell, C.S.S.R., "Common Confession Rite," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 156 (1967) 409-12. Johannes Neumann complains of the frequency of this procedure when a concrete situation is to be judged in terms of a previous formulation of divine law; cf. "Das Jus Divinum im Kirchenrecht," *Orientierung* 31 (1967) 5-8.

their continuity with these privileged origin-phenomena. If there is a once-for-all character of Christian revelation, its closure did not amount to divine silence or retraction.⁴ It involved a completion that, of inner necessity, was ongoing.

This principle has led at times to a haphazard application of previous conciliar teachings to subsequent problems without any recognition of the problems involved. In their quest for the historical Jesus,⁵ and later in their consideration of revelation as a language event,⁶ Protestant scholars have confronted the hermeneutical issue. It has been no less an object of study for Roman Catholics concerned with the evolution of doctrine. Surely those who stand with Newman for the legitimacy and need of the gospel's development would seem to be unlikely candidates for fundamentalist positions with regard to decrees of the ecumenical councils.

But on the question of integral confession in the case of public celebrations of penance, the opposite has too often been the case. The reasoning in such instances is simple. What the Council of Trent solemnly defined regarding confession is true and not in need of historical interpretation to guarantee its applicability in the twentieth century. Today general absolution without specific confession of mortal sins is viewed as at least sometimes conducive to liturgical renewal of the ecclesial dimension of penance. In this context the practice cannot be excluded on the basis of the definitions of Trent.⁷ And to assert the contrary is not to commend the Church's teaching authority; for the latter was exercised very carefully at Trent in this regard. And when the canons in question are understood in their historical setting, they possess a value, meaning, and binding force for the believing Catholic today as well. This is not, however, to accord them a decisive role in solving the peculiarly contemporary pastoral problems facing the Latin Church in the area of penitential reform. Such would be an uncritical inference from past practice to present policy. Its consequence would be to dissuade concerned men of the present from studying or even seriously considering the Church's penitential experience and discipline in the past. If medical doctors formed their diagnosis solely on the basis of previous health records and ignored all current symptoms, they

⁴ Karl Rahner, "The Development of Dogma," in *Theological Investigations* 1 (Baltimore, 1961) 48-49.

⁵ Cf. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York, 1964); Stephen Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1961* (Oxford, 1964).

⁶ Cf. Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and the Word of God* (New York, 1966).

⁷ Cf. C. J. Peter, "Auricular Confession and the Council of Trent," in *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 22 (1967) 185-200.

would likely lose more patients and inspire less confidence in their clientele. And it is doubtful that the profession of the healing arts would attract as many generous candidates as it does presently.

With a radically different approach, F. J. Heggen proceeds from the conviction that the malaise connected with the sacrament of penance in the Church today must be met with remedies dictated by present needs rather than norms from the past.⁸ His intention is to offer practical, pastoral suggestions. In so doing, he argues that public celebrations of penance without private confession of serious sins can be sacramental in the strict sense of the term.⁹ Such a form is favored as a complement rather than replacement for the one now prevalent in the Western Church.¹⁰ There is much to be said for this proposal and in my opinion no dogmatic obstacle to its realization.¹¹

But Heggen's procedure also gives rise to a number of side effects. These take the form of questions or problems so varied that no one is competent to deal with them all. If specialization is a necessity in religious studies today, its inherent limits require close collaboration on the part of those with expertise in different but interrelated aspects of a subject. Thus, the historian of penance will almost surely have a perspective and preoccupations that differ from those of a liturgist interested primarily in the renewal of the rite as it now exists. If these two do not work together on a shared project, one or another aspect of importance will likely be overlooked. It is not enough to propose a new form for the celebration of penance, note a conflict between this and past precedent, and conclude by saying that, after all, Trent's requirement dates to the sixteenth century.¹² Why one can *credibly* dispense with certain precedents (e.g., integrity of confession) and retain others (humble acknowledgment of guilt to God in His Church) is not self-evident. The question is how and to what extent the past is normative; and personal taste does not have much to commend it as an answer. But such issues Heggen does not even raise.

The study required for a proper evaluation of the contemporary situation regarding the celebration of penance cannot feasibly be carried out by a single individual. Over and over again similar situations occur in the practice of medicine. This should not be construed as arguing for

⁸ Cf. F. J. Heggen, *Confession and the Service of Penance* (Notre Dame, 1968).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98. Paul Palmer's criticism of those confusing public penance with public confession does not apply to Heggen; see "Communal Penance," *America* 118 (1968) 293-95.

¹¹ This is particularly the case with the difficulty arising from the Tridentine canons, as I have tried to show elsewhere; cf. "Auricular Confession," p. 200.

¹² Cf. Heggen, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-7.

parity of roles between the physician and the analyst of penitential reform in the Church; but the care expected of the former must not be missing in the latter's approach. Neither can ignore case histories without running needless risks of being charged with malpractice; and the endeavors of both can lead to a better future for man precisely because of the rigorous selectivity, the critical analysis, and the studied evaluation of evidence that are involved in their respective procedures.

In addition to these views regarding the normative influence of conciliar definitions on contemporary penitential practice, there is yet another. It amounts to studying the past with the purpose of determining its relation to pastoral concerns of the present. In the matter at hand the outcome has been a discovery. The Tridentine precedents, understood in their historical context, allow for considerable renewal of the sacrament of penance in the direction of communal celebrations either with or without integral confession of serious sin. A recent article of Zoltan Alszeghy is a good example.¹³ He uses Heggen's work in German translation and shares many of the latter's desires with regard to ritual modifications.¹⁴ Yet he asserts that some of the Dutch author's opinions are irreconcilable with the dogmatic definitions of Trent.¹⁵ If this is clearly a matter of major concern for Alszeghy, Heggen gives no indication that he is preoccupied with more than what he honestly considers needed here and now. Similar conclusions do not exclude serious differences in the way they are reached.

Alszeghy's willingness to make penitential discipline of the past assist rather than dominate the process of determining the genuine needs of the present is a step forward. It goes a long way toward avoiding the pitfalls of both uncritical approaches to the renewal of penance.¹⁶ In this it is a remarkable example of bringing historical method to the service of a pastoral problem. And yet along with the practitioners of the other approaches, he simply takes for granted an issue that is crucial.

RENEWAL OF PENANCE AND CREDIBILITY

All this concern for a liturgical rite is undoubtedly worth while; such is the point of view shared by the various participants in the dispute just described. Because they do not attempt to explain or justify this

¹³ Z. Alszeghy, S.J., "Problemi dogmatici della celebrazione penitenziale communitaria," *Gregorianum* 48 (1967) 577-87.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 578-79. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 578.

¹⁶ In his recent work on penance, *Shalom: Peace, the Sacrament of Reconciliation* (New York, 1968) Bernard Häring simply takes it for granted that integral confession of sin is a "Church law"; cf. p. 92; nor are the reasons for such a stand given.

conviction, they can devote their attention almost exclusively to the question of innovation or continuity in teaching and practice. But it is precisely their theistic presupposition that many Christians, Roman Catholics included, have come to find most perplexing.

It is not true to say that the issue of credibility has been completely ignored in this discussion of penance. Heggen raises it when he speaks of the secularization that has occurred in the notions of sin and forgiveness.¹⁷ So does Mackey in his effort to find in the world of experience the proper model to describe the phenomenon of sin in man's relation with God.¹⁸ But the fact is that what for an ever-increasing number of educated men and women is the central issue has not been directly faced: the God-question. The motive for silence may well be an awareness that similar attempts to come to grips with it in the past have often been polemical and characterized by a rationalism that minimized the mystery of grace. But whatever the reason, the result is sure: the question of credibility has been neglected.

This is not to minimize the difficulties and deficiencies that have been written about most: those dealing with the communal or private character of the sacrament.¹⁹ But a real question on the pastoral level still remains unanswered: Does the malaise connected with sacramental confession today arise solely or even mainly from its private character? To reform the rite with the untested assumption that this is the case runs the risk of treating what may turn out to be a symptom. One finds definite indications that the root of the problem manifesting itself in discontent with the present form of penance lies a great deal deeper.

There is today a general preoccupation (or one far too widespread to neglect) with meaning and credibility. This extends to the Church's penitential rite with its claim to be a meeting of sinful man and God through Christ Jesus. The form the celebration takes may involve a public assembly of the community of faith or the privacy of the confessional. But if God-talk in this context refers to someone transcendent to all human beings and their attitudes, the person asked to believe He is operative in the sacrament will surely find either form a challenge to understanding. That this has much to do with the dissatisfaction re-

¹⁷ Cf. Heggen, *op. cit.*, pp. 78 ff., esp. p. 93, where Bishop Robinson's *Honest to God* is cited.

¹⁸ Cf. J. P. Mackey, "The Idea of Sin in the Modern World," in *Sin and Repentance* (ed. Denis O'Callaghan; Staten Island, 1968) pp. 59-61.

¹⁹ Traditional Catholic theology has spoken of the acts of penitent and confessor; there can be no doubt that the ecclesial character of both deserves more effective ritual expression. Vatican II called for change along these lines (cf. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 72); implementation of this proposal is a matter of urgency.

garding penance today deserves more attention than it has received. But to speak of problems arising because of increasing secularization and to prescind from this is to look away from a factor that cries for attention.

This is not a call for a return to an apologetic like that found in many of the theological tractates on revelation and in catechetical handbooks of the early part of the century. There is a need, but for something quite different. As Karl Barth made good dogmatics its own apologetic for the faith, so a contemporary liturgy of penance ought to commend the theistic conviction its ritual signs both presuppose and seek to strengthen. In an attempt to avoid the religious disaster of rationalism, the authors writing most about the renewal of penance have neglected this aspect of the question.

Heggen, for example, proposes model services along the lines he considers desirable.²⁰ But the prayers he offers by way of illustration so often involve invocations of God. One may ask—rightly, I am convinced—whether it could be otherwise. But the fact is that these forms are intended to meet what are described as the needs of men today. The latter, the reader is told, have experienced a secularization of sin and require as a result a modified way of doing penance. It is unlikely that such men will see effects of secularization where a transcendent God is so obviously presupposed throughout. If the cosmic poltergeist Bishop Robinson described as God was unrecognizable to many theologians, this was not the case with a good number of others.²¹ As a result, a God who meets the repentant sinner in merciful forgiveness is for many a greater enigma than ever before.

Perhaps Heggen and others like him are simply calling for a “socialization” of penance when they use the term “secularization.” If so, they join their voices to a growing consensus that such is required. But there is an increased questioning of the meaning of theism in our day. In renewing the rite of penance, it would be possible to ignore this phenomenon. To do so, however, would indicate that little has been learned from a similar experience with regard to Eucharistic reform.

Educated believers today do not have an idea of God that has endured without notable modification through the profound changes that have affected the entire world. However one may react to this, it is a

²⁰ Cf. Heggen, *op. cit.*, pp. 124–76.

²¹ Cf. E. L. Mascall, *The Secularization of Christianity* (New York, 1966) pp. 106–89. In this regard the failure to see the importance of the God-problem in a variety of contexts is surprising; an example is *The Crisis of Liturgical Reform* (= *Concilium* 42; New York, 1969).

fact. The acceptance or rejection of a transcendent reality corresponding to the notion employed in God-talk is an option. But it is also true, as Paul van Buren has pointed out, that not all options are of the same cut.²² For the Christian, faith involves a decision to look at particular situations in the context of an over-all view of life and reality. In the case of penance, two concrete situations command his attention. One involves an ordained priest and a penitent in a confessional; the other has a larger group (perhaps even a whole parish) assembled. In both, guilt and its release are the desired result. So far one rests on an empirically verifiable level. But to speak of an encounter with God in either case is problematic. This is true for many contemporary men, Roman Catholics no less than others. To assume it is otherwise will likely lead to further liturgical disillusionment.

The death-of-God theology has probably run its course.²³ But the type of question it popularized will not be dismissed as quickly.²⁴ As long as a transcendent being is held to figure prominently in a liturgical rite such as penance, the quest for credibility will influence the attitudes of participants. Whether the form is private or communal makes little difference from this point of view.

PRECEDENTS IN A QUEST FOR CREDIBILITY

Perhaps a valuable lesson can be learned here from the course taken by research into the formation of the Gospels. The original quest for the historical Jesus was often motivated by a desire to rest faith on scientific research and its conclusions. At least it has been thus evaluated by those very familiar with it.²⁵ Given the confessional nature of the biblical sources, the goal was unattainable. There is also reason to question the theological legitimacy of the whole task as thus conceived.²⁶ Realization of this, coupled with the frustration generated by the works of Wrede and Schweitzer at the beginning of the present century, led Bultmann and others like him to concentrate on the kerygma of the primitive Church instead. But a new quest for the historical Jesus has arisen, one that does not seek to find the Christ of

²² Cf. Paul van Buren, *Theological Explorations* (New York, 1968) pp. 48, 138-40, 172-73.

²³ At least van Buren is of this opinion; cf. *ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁴ This is borne out by the appearance of the first American edition of Ronald Hepburn's *Christianity and Paradox* (New York, 1968). His doubts regarding theism are reaching sympathetic ears as a result of the death-of-God theology in the United States.

²⁵ Cf. James M. Robinson. *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London, 1963) pp. 26-47. See also Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* 1 (London, 1965) 26.

²⁶ Cf. Robinson, *ibid.*

faith with the documents and methods of secular history. Still it is definitely concerned with establishing as credible a continuity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Otherwise the kerygma proclaiming the risen Lord appears to dissolve into pure myth.²⁷

The aim of the new quest is clearly not to demonstrate apodictically that what Christians believe of Jesus is true. Nor is proof being sought for the contention that such faith is the position man must reach if he is to be reasonable. What is intended is an investigation of the nexus between the proclamation of the risen Lord by the primitive Church on the one hand and the word-deeds of Jesus on the other. A positive continuity between the two is seen to be a precondition of faith as an intelligent option. Assertion of such a relationship leaves intact the freedom involved in believing; a denial, on the other hand, makes faith recognizably whimsical. That is too high a price to pay in the judgment of those who have consequently set out on a new quest.

In a similar way, intelligent consideration, study, and attempts to resolve questions regarding the credibility of the penance experience will never eliminate the mysterious character of a forgiving God. Nor will they obviate the necessity for option in accepting or rejecting the rite in question as a genuine encounter with far more than other human beings. But such efforts may help to show what this option entails and why it is far from being absurd or unbecoming to man come scientifically of age. Credibility should mean at least this in a liturgical context. And the rite of penance must convey this impression, namely, that its participants precisely as such are taking a responsible position regarding the ultimate personal meaning of human existence. This will give the necessary assurance that one who opts to share in the sacramental experience and view it as an encounter with a merciful God is not acting rashly or arbitrarily even by purely human standards. The words and actions involved in the revised form must arise from and lead of themselves to one conviction that is biblical in origin but contemporary in its meaning. God wills the salvation of man; and because this is true and not simply confused speech or fantasy, man of the mid-twentieth century can take renewed hope.

Concerted efforts will be required of many if recognizably credible rites of forgiveness are to be realized. A project is imperative that merits the collaboration of theologians, liturgists, catechists, and artists, whose services are required for success. Each of these specialists will bring a particular perspective that will help determine what is

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 13-14. See also Helmut Riedlinger, *Geschichtlichkeit und Vollendung des Wissens Christi* (Freiburg, 1966) pp. 9-23.

needed. Hopefully, all will see their common task from the point of view of a credibility gap that exists and that will not vanish simply because it is ignored.

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