Penance and the History of Penance

by Hamish Swanston

In a previous article in this Journal (*December*, 1968) I presented a description of some elements in the contemporary revival of the Penance Service. This description made it plain that there is not one novel element in such services and that their procedures derive from the traditional practice of the Church. I based this description on my experience of the contemporary celebration of the sacrament in a variety of community contexts, and certainly these services are going on all over the place. This is evidenced in several recent books. *Penance: Virtue and Sacrament,* edited by John Fitzsimons (Burns and Oates, Compass Books, 90 pp., 18s., 1969), gives the papers and some idea of the excitements of the 1968 Spode Conference of Practical Liturgy. These papers and the essays collected in *Making Sense of Confession* edited by Otto Betz (Chapman, 25s., 1968), show us what is entailed in the appreciation of penance as a sign of the renewing love of Christ in the eucharistic congregation. These two books are decisively adult in tone, expressive of an awareness that, as Cardinal Rampolla once remarked, 'of necessity the Church should be democratic, not demagogic, but simply the *plebs sancta*', and alive to the urgent demands of penance if we are to come into that holiness. Fr F. J. Heggen's *Children and Confession* (Sheed and Ward, Stag Books, 118 pp., 9s., 1969) is a more particularized effort which is concerned with one area in which most successful celebrations have been developing in many parts of the world. I found the examples he presented from the work of Fr P. J. Mass of Maastricht not totally free from sentimentalism but they have obviously pleased and done their work among Dutch and German congregations. It would be folly to expect any form to have general appeal. Fr Harry Haas shows, in *Celebrations* (Sheed and Ward, Stag Books, 209 pp., 13s., 1969), that nothing entirely satisfactory has occurred to this most energetic and enlivening priest in his circumnavigations, but this has not prevented his continuing effort for a better liturgical expression of the Church. His book, like that of Fr Heggen, declares itself to be a translation rather in the incidentals than in the body of the work. There is an amusing example of non-naturalization in the assumption that Stag Book readers need to be told that Fr Laurence Bright is a Dominican lecturer (footnote, p. 174).

With these contemporary discussions I have also been reading older authors and patristic literature to learn more of the history of

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Penance, and am much confirmed in the opinion that there is a deal of support in our tradition for divers kinds of Penance Service. We have a varied history. A patristic interpretation of Christian forgiveness which, even until the sixth century in some places, allowed sacramental confession only once in a life-time, should be looked at as a manifestation in sacramental history of that problem in the African churches of re-baptizing the apostate, and has to be taken with the equally orthodox exploits of those medievals, like Dorothy of Mantua, who went to confess their sins and receive absolution several times a day.

It is not surprising, therefore, that from such a diversified history we should be able to demonstrate the harmony of almost any modern practice with some previous activity in the tradition. The ancient Lenten penitential practices, for example, have influenced various present rites. The ashes commonly distributed on the first Wednesday are a remnant sign of the ceremonial admitting sinners to the status of penitent at the beginning of their Lenten preparation for communion. Bishop Moors of Roermond in his liberalizing 1964 diocesan directives for 'first confessions' took it as axiomatic that 'the children are best introduced to the sacrament of penance during Lent', a view evidently influenced by the traditional way with public sinners. Less evidently it would seem that the liturgical frame of the Maundy reconciliation by the bishop of Lenten penitents is responsible for the Singalese practice, remarked by Fr Haas, of forming great Thursday queues for confession.

The liturgical rite in celebration is a self-authenticating context for the congregation, and we should not expect the men of Carthage or of Ceylon to question their own experience while they are within the rite. The congregation is not self-consciously creative of the tradition. But when we now come to consider the tradition in its present relation to the community those who would consciously determine our future practice will want to evaluate the activities which have grown from the primitive belief. There is a demand, therefore, for methods of assessing all, some or any of these activities as vitalizing for our present ecclesial life. Generally such an assessment will proceed from an enquiry into what the members of the community meant by their celebration. But the setting up of such an enquiry has peculiar difficulties. Precisely because liturgy, unlike rubric, is not self-conscious, people rarely keep liturgical diaries. Some do, of course, especially during their 'spiritual exercises'. Newman's Littlemore notes, for example, present us with some useful information on his attitudes towards penance, but this is a singular instance. And even if there is a deal of evidence on which to base a judgment of what people thought they were doing in a rite, this evidence and judgment may not take us to the centre of the liturgy.

The curate 'in the box' raises his hand at the absolution for precisely the same originating reason as the confessor in St Peter's

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lays his billiard-cue-like rod on the shoulder of the penitent. Both are residual gestures of that laying on of hands which until late in the Middle Ages was understood as the 'matter' of Penance, but it is unlikely that either priest thinks of his action as in any way parallel with the wheaten bread and the juice of the grape in the eucharistic liturgy. I have had the first gesture explained to me as a sign of the penitent being under the law of the Church, and the second as a sign that he is redeemed from 'being beaten with rods'. Presumably the first explanation is derived from a confused association of 'the arm of the law' and the traffic policeman, and the second is parallel to that other misrepresentation of the kiss of peace which suggests that the bishop's welcoming embrace at Confirmation is a symbol of the buffeting the 'soldier of Christ' is to receive from 'the world'.

Such misapprehensions of what is going on in the liturgy of penance today will be cautionary assistants in evaluating just what the medieval German and Spanish abbesses understood by their action when, having given their nuns spiritual direction, they pronounced something suspiciously like the sacramental form of remission of sins.

Those who do not give themselves an inaccurate account of the significance of their ritual acts may yet not have arrived at the certainties of their case. For example, it is not at all uncommon for someone who has taken part in a Penance Service to ask afterwards whether sin is really forgiven in this rite. The questioner almost always expects the answer 'yes', but it is asked. So when we speak of the gradual development of the monastic exagoreusis into sacramental penance, and how easily the confession of faults by a novice to his novice master evolved into a sacramental event in the Church, we ought to be aware of the uncertainties involved in such a development and of how often the question must have been asked: 'Does it really forgive sin?'. The Roman practice was not built in a day even by Irish monks, even in the seventh century.

The unreliability of eye-witnesses, and the almost total uselessness of hear-say evidence, has brought liturgical historians, like lawyers, to rely on the character of the documents. This has obvious disadvantages, since liturgy is not a text but an action, but it is at least dealing with the examinable and the discussible. The service books of different rites and the liturgical enactments of different synods might be expected to offer some guidance in the quest for exact information on the meaning of the ritual. The interpretation of documents, even when this is agreed by the experts, often enough, however, produces new difficulties for those who would translate the previous understanding of the community into present practice. The deprecatory form of absolution in several of the Eastern liturgies of penance, and its recognition in the sacramental theology of the West, makes it difficult to frame anything but an authoritarian

objection to those theses which now take the *Confiteor* and its attendant prayers to be absolving of all sin at the fore-mass. Again, the examination of Pius XII's *Mystici Corporis* of 1943 discloses that the Pope recommended frequent confession since it (i) provided an occasion for salutary spiritual direction and (ii) led to the reception of grace by the efficacy of the sacrament itself. This ordering of priorities was doubtless a slip of the drafting assistant who may have had a particularly helpful director of conscience, but its presence in the document demonstrates the difficulties attendant upon any theory which works from the assumption that the text cannot but reveal the mind of the authority. And, of course, there is not always agreement on the interpretation of the text. The history of the commission which examined the documents and service-books of the Anglican liturgy, as this is detailed in Fr J. J. Hughes' excellent study *Absolutely Null and Void* (Sheed and Ward, 63s., 1968), demonstrates how widely differing readings may be made of documents of this kind. *Apostolicae Curae* settled in 1896 not the intention of the service-book compilers in the past but the practical line to be taken by authority in the present. Perhaps it would be wrong to require anything more.

Because we are members of a community which is very old we are sometimes led to think that we may find answers to our present problems in the past. There is, for example, a deal of historical evidence on the way Penance has been celebrated in the community in those collections recently published by Chapman and Burns and Oates, and this is typical of much liturgical work being done today. The reformer has accepted the established appeal to the past, though he generally moves the appeal back a few centuries. We are often told that the 'tradition' to which appeal is made in the text-books is merely post-Tridentine, and that the primitive Church did things differently. The differences must have arisen from differences in the social condition of the community rather than from a difference in the giving of the Spirit. There is no more virtue in the ways of the primitive Church than in those of the sophisticated Church, and, historical research and exegesis being so indecisive for such matters, we choose one or other set of ways because we suppose it suits our community purposes now. This is the proper method of reformer as well as magisterium. The reality of the Communion of Saints means that history tells us not what others did in a similar situation but what we did in a different situation.

The historian's fallacy is to suppose that research will of itself resolve the present call for action:

> How mad would he have to be to say, 'He beheld
> An order and thereafter he belonged
> To it'?

We cannot deal with ourselves if we resort only to the linear interpretations of the historian. We must not demand of the necessary professionalisms of one member of the community that they perform

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the total work of the community. Once the historian has presented the results of his scriptural exegesis and archival research the community must make the effort to understand why these texts were written and these actions done. The realization of the meaning of the past must lead not to an archaeological congress and exhibition but to a renewal of self-understanding in new forms of liturgy.

We need to comprehend historical evidence from our own participation in the Church. We need to recognize that history is linear as a spiral is linear, and reveals the centre of that Christian life we share with the community in every age.

The young electronics student who has a college room next to mine is ever suggesting to himself, and to those who will talk the night into morning with him, that we are here only to discover why we are here, and hopes to make the discovery through his devotion to his lady-love. His conception of the necessary order and its spring has much in common with that earlier understanding of Lucretius that the physical universe could not begin to make sense until he had sung his song to Venus, *quae quoniam rerum naturam sola gubernas*. It has much in common, too, with the appreciation of ordered continuity in *Hebrews*' proclamation of Jesus Christ who 'is the same today as he was yesterday and as he will be for ever'. It is only through such an understanding of the order of present love that we shall be the community in historical continuity with the Catholic Church. The only tradition and the only reform is the renewal of charity.

The detailed investigation of the history of liturgical practice is of both negative and positive value. Negatively, the study will offer primary checks by which a suggestion for our contemporary liturgy can be tested against the scriptural disclosure of the Christian community. It will also be possible from a consideration of past practices to warn liturgical questioners that certain modes of celebration have proved to be incompatible with the proper expression of the wonder of Christ among us. It may also perhaps be possible for men to learn from historical studies what practices now in possession should be rejected as distortions of an earlier sensitivity to this wonder. It will not, of course, always be possible to achieve agreement on the results of such negative checking. There has been some debate, for example, whether the penitential aspect of the Communion of Saints is properly expressed by even the restored procedures of indulgence. Greater harmony may be brought to liturgical discussion by reference to the positive value of historical scholarship. Scholarly study of past liturgies should bring us to a realization of our participation in the ecclesial reality. It should be possible for us to see ourselves as members of others, and to see others in so many various ways as members of the one Christ:

> Christ plays in ten thousand places,
> Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his,
> To the Father through the features of men's faces.

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We ought to enquire into our history for indications of how we are to grow in that love which first brought men to devise such celebrations and which will bring us to other and faithful devisings.

The study of our community history is, therefore, not properly to bring us to the point of repetition. Nor is it to provide an armoury of precedents for what we want to do. History is given as one context in which we may discover our vocation to celebrate now. It is to Christ that the history of the community brings us, and we do history a wrong if we rest in the examination of past manners of Penance instead of working out new ways of realizing the present forgiveness of Christ.

If we understand Dorothy of Mantua aright we shall not be at a loss for moments in our lives when we can participate as often as she in the one forgiveness. We might well, for example, make it our daily business to fulfil the hope of a famous American newspaperman that those who wished to please his ghost would 'forgive a sinner and wink at a homely girl'.

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