

THE LITURGY OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

BY

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ONE of the most significant features in modern Church life is no doubt the interest taken by the laity in the liturgy. The liturgies of the Mass and of the Sacraments of Baptism, Holy Orders and Extreme Unction in particular invite us by the variety of their ceremonies and texts to follow them in all their details and, in fact, are well known in both their historical development and their present form. There is perhaps one lacuna in this liturgical discussion. Apart from the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, no Sacrament is more frequently received by us than is the Sacrament of Penance; and yet we rarely hear of the liturgy of this Sacrament and its history. In fact, some Catholics might be surprised at the application of the term 'liturgy' to the Sacrament of Penance.

In his Encyclical *The Mystical Body of Christ*, the Holy Father has complained of a neglect, at present found in many countries, of the Sacrament of Penance. The neglect of which this Encyclical complained is not that by apostates or luke-warm Catholics, but arises from a misconception of this Sacrament by Catholics, well-meaning and 'good' in the ordinary sense, and, in fact, by advocates of what is known as the liturgical movement. One of the errors underlying this misconception is that there is a contrast between the liturgy—that is, the public prayer of the whole Church—and private devotion. The Sacrament of Penance is of course the most individualist of all the Sacraments, and in the history of this Sacrament we see an ever-growing recognition by the Church of that tendency towards responsible development of the individual's spiritual life which distinguishes modern man at his best.

The Roman Pontifical, the liturgical book concerned with the functions reserved to the bishop, still contains the Orders for the expulsion from the Church (on Ash Wednesday) and the reception (on Holy Thursday) of public penitents, but these are now only the most conspicuous relics of liturgical functions which, though fallen into disuse, are still preserved in the official liturgical

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books. Amongst the Occasional Prayers in the appendix of the Roman Missal we still have the prayers for public penitents; along with the sick, the travellers and those in prison, the public penitents originally were the 'absent brethren' specially commemorated in the general prayer of intercession said at the end of the Mass of the Catechumens, when to this day the priest turns to the congregation saying: 'Let us pray', although the subsequent Offertory is not a prayer.

It has been shown that it was largely due to the activities of the early Irish missionaries on the Continent that private confession became the general rule, and the ceremonies concerned with public penitents were dispensed with. In the present-day Roman Ritual the principal point of the preface to the order of the administration of the Sacrament of Penance is the safe-guarding of privacy. Recognising the special importance of private confession to the modern mind, the Jesuits promoted the veneration of St John Nepomucene as the patron of the seal of Confession. Up to 1913 his feast was also celebrated in Ireland and the texts proper to his Mass abound with references to the sacredness of the seal of Confession.

The reception of the Sacrament of Penance is a liturgical function not because it is performed by a whole congregation or in public, but because of the jurisdictional or legal character of confession and absolution. The Ritual says that 'the Confessor is, in the first instance, a judge', and this point is brought home to us by the fact that when administering this Sacrament the priest sits rather than stands, while according to modern custom the penitent kneels. The liturgical character is further emphasised by the rule that, except in cases of urgent necessity, confessions should be heard in a place of public worship, and that the priest should make sure that he has the faculty of absolving the penitent.

In the Roman Ritual, which is the official liturgical book concerned with the administration of the Sacraments and the Sacramentals, the third chapter dealing with the Sacrament of Penance is one of the shortest. In fact, with regard to the liturgical texts prescribed for its administration, this is the shortest order, consisting only of the *Misereatur tui omnipotens Deus* and *Indulgentiam, absolutionem et remissionem* (as in the beginning of the Mass), the formula of absolution, and the prayer *Passio Domini nostri Jesu Christi*. While the Ordinary of the Mass has gradually

grown in size and the orders of the Sacraments of Baptism, Holy Orders and Extreme Unction consist of a large number of ceremonies and prayer, the present-day order of the Sacrament of Penance is merely a fragment of a much ampler form found in the liturgical books of the Middle Ages.

The prescription now enjoined by the Ritual that there should be a grating between the Confessor and the penitent excludes the imposition of the hands, the oldest ceremony observed in the administration of the Sacrament of Penance. I have been told that up to the beginning of this century in Irish country parishes, Confessions were still heard in full view of the rest of the church, the priest simply sitting on a chair and the penitent kneeling in front rather than at the side. At present the imposition of the hands is still recalled by the priest's raising his hands towards the penitent when pronouncing the words *Indulgentiam ab, solutionem et remissionem*. The form of the Sacrament of Penance of course consists of the words: 'I absolve thee', which suffice for absolution in danger of death. From the ancient liturgical books it appears that the custom of making the sign of the Cross over the penitent is even older than these words. In the Middle Ages, the ceremonies of Confession included a preparatory prayer by the priest, an examination of the penitent's faith and some other prayers from which, in private confession, the priest chose one or two. The first short order of private confession is found in the Acts of the Synod of Nimes, A.D. 1248, where the absolution is given in the indicative ('I absolve thee . . .') rather than the deprecativ form ('May God absolve thee') which had been formerly used. The deprecativ form, as used in the beginning of the Mass, is expressive of a Sacramental rather than a Sacrament. To this day the transition from the deprecativ form of the *Misereatur* to the indicative form of absolution is one of the most striking features in the administration of the Sacrament of Penance. When discussing this Sacrament, St Thomas (*Summa Theol.* III, 84, 3) said that the *Misereatur* and *Indulgentiam*, etc. are said *before* the absolution in order that the effect of the Sacrament might not be impeded on the part of the penitent whose actions are the matter of the Sacrament. For this reason, during the Middle Ages, the priest often blessed the penitent saying: 'May God be in your heart and on your lips' — an adaptation of the blessing of the deacon before the reading of the Gospel.

In conformity with the Council of Trent, the Ritual says that the remote matter of the Sacrament of Penance is the sins of the penitent, while the nearer matter is his contrition, confession and satisfaction. This Sacrament is one of the dead, because it raises the soul from the death of sin to the life of grace. When the penitent enters the confessional he says: 'Bless me, father, for I have sinned', thus begging, even before his absolution, for a confirmation of his connection with the living Church. 'It is better to be cured within the Church's community than to be cut off from its body as incurable. No reason to despair of the health of whatever is still part of the body.' (Encyclical *The Mystical Body*.)

Both the *Confiteor* and the prayers said before absolution are the same as in the introduction of the Mass. The *Confiteor* originated from an ancient Roman prayer known as the *Apologies*. In the eleventh century it was said in its present-day form; it was then too that the custom originated of striking the breast thrice when saying 'through my fault . . .'. Before the Council of Trent and the universal introduction of the Missal in its modern form, there were many local variations in the *Confiteor*, especially in detailed lists of sins (up to more than fifty) and long lists of Saints (including SS. Patrick, Brigid and Columbanus). Some religious congregations still have the privilege of inserting their founder's name before the words 'and all the saints'.

A minor point expressive of the unique liturgical position of the Sacrament of Penance is the place held in its administration by the bishop. In Mass the server says 'I confess to you, father', even when the celebrant is a bishop or the Pope (though it was occasionally suggested that the word 'father' should then be replaced by the words 'most reverend father'). In Mass, at the words 'to you, father', the server makes a deep bow when the celebrant is a bishop and a genuflection when the celebrant is the Pope. In Confession, at the words 'I absolve thee', the priest makes the sign of the Cross once, and the bishop twice.

The final prayer *Passio Domini nostri Jesu Christi* confirms that the penitent has been restored as a living member of the mystical body of Christ. All the merits and sufferings of a single member of the Church are to be considered in the light of the sufferings of Christ and the merits of the Saints. We can take part in the liturgical life of the Church only as living members of the mystical body of Christ, that is, when we are in the state of grace. Cut off

from this source of life through mortal sin, we cease to live, becoming unable to receive the Sacraments of the living or to gain indulgences.

The general instructions prefacing, in the Ritual, the order of the administration of the Sacrament of Penance say that goodness, knowledge, wisdom and silence are the main virtues required by the confessor. Expressly referring to 'penance', the Collects proper to their feasts propose SS. Francis Caracciola, Peter of Alcantara, Francis of Assisi and John Mary Vianney as the great exponents of these virtues. The only reference made in the Missal to the Sacrament of Penance as such occurs in the Collect for the feast of St Raymund of Pennafort, renowned for his judgment and zeal in the confessional. The Ritual prescribes that the priest should not only study the Church's doctrine on Penance but also 'all the other things necessary for the correct administration of this Sacrament', that is, the canonical and liturgical aspects. Finally, the Ritual says, the confessor should wear a purple surplice or stole.

With regard to the penitent the Ritual says: 'He should be admonished to approach with becoming humility of mind and deportment and kneeling should fortify himself with the sign of the Cross'. The Ritual denounces that 'silly suppression of truth to which some penitents are induced by diabolic intimation'.

We know that perhaps the greatest problem of our age is the inability of many of our fellow-men to approach the confessional. Going back to the liturgical sources, we find sound instruction on the meaning of the Sacrament of Penance and warm encouragement to help others to understand it. At the beginning of Lent, on Thursday after Ash Wednesday, the meaning of this Sacrament is summed up in the words: 'God is offended by sin and appeased by penance'. 'God does not desire the death of sinners but that they repent' (Collect for deliverance from mortality). Perhaps the most important liturgical prayers to help modern man to understand the meaning of contrition, Confession and Penance are the beautiful prayers 'For the gift of tears', found among the Occasional Prayers in the Appendix of the Missal. There is no human being, however hostile to or ignorant of the Church, that would not understand that this is an intention which comes right from a mother's heart.

To sum up, therefore, the liturgical importance of this sacra-

ment from the minister's point of view lies in the surplice and stole he wears, the way he sits formally as a judge in the place of God himself, the action of holding his hand extended towards the penitent, and the sign of the Cross he makes over him. All this is, of course, subservient to the words which he pronounces as a liturgical formula of the gravest type. The penitent, too, plays an active part in this liturgy by walking to the seat of absolution, kneeling down gravely as a sign of humility and contrition and pronouncing his sins in the accents of the *Confiteor*, simply and before the whole Church of heaven and on earth—'to all the saints and to you, father'. Priest and penitent should therefore consider their liturgical functions in this sacrament and perform them as the act of 'public worship' which is implied in those functions.



THE LAST PSALM OF ALL

By

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ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! *Praise ye the Lord*, you whom he has made, you whom he has redeemed, you to whom he has promised heaven; praise him who has so greatly loved you. Praise him *in his holy places*, in his church and tabernacle where day and night he waits your praise; praise him in the soul which he has given you and where by grace he dwells.

Praise him! Praise him!

Praise ye him in the firmament of his power. Regard by day the sun, set in the concave depths of the sky. Look by night upon the moon with her attendant stars. These he hath made and an infinitude of other creatures hidden from our eyes. But what are these compared with that glorious heaven which he is always making ready for those who love him?

Praise him! Praise him!

Praise ye him for his mighty acts, and how mighty they are! He has created all things and he holds them always in being. He has created you. He has redeemed you. He makes you holy, he