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Confession of Sins  
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A  
DIVINE INSTITUTION

By  
REV. BERTRAND L. CONWAY, C.S.P.

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*Fiftieth Thousand*  
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New York  
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*From the French of the Abbe Tixeront*

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# Confession of Sins a Divine Institution

BY THE ABBE TIXERONT.

*(Translated from the French by Rev. Bertrand L. Conway, C.S.P.)*

F all the practices of the Catholic Church, the institution of Confession is too burdensome and too beneficent an institution to have escaped denunciation on the part of her enemies. Novelists of the realistic school—hypocritically solicitous, as we know, for the virtue of purity—have denounced it as a monstrous school of moral perversion. Protestant controversialists, fearful of arousing their deadened consciences, have declared it an intolerable burden that must be gotten rid of at all costs. Both of these objections may easily be answered from the standpoint of experience, and are really matter for the moralist rather than the theologian. But there is another difficulty of an historical character which rationalistic criticism puts forth to-day against Confession, which may be profitable to discuss. It asserts in brief that the Sacrament of Penance or, as we often style it, Confession, is by no means a primitive institution established by Jesus Christ and known to the early Christians, but a rather late practice unknown until the seventh century, and only definitely organized in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by the great scholastics, especially St. Thomas.

An American, Mr. Charles Lea of Philadelphia, has written the most complete treatise on this theory, viz., *The*

*History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences in the Latin Church.* In this work he tries to prove that the penance spoken of by the Fathers and ancient ecclesiastical writers was not our Sacrament of Penance at all; that the Church did not pardon sin interiorly as an offence against God, but merely restored the sinner to the Christian society from which his sins had excluded him; that the sinner's confession of sins was not made with a view of obtaining pardon, but merely to repair the scandal he had caused to the community of the faithful; that, in a word, the whole affair belonged entirely to the external forum, was essentially disciplinary in character, and in no way affected the soul or the conscience of the sinner. The sinner dealt with God directly when he demanded pardon of his sins. It was only later on that *sacerdotalism* came into being, and the clergy determined to claim for themselves the power of remitting sins, and thereby of opening and shutting the doors of the kingdom of heaven. Only then was auricular confession instituted, and a new sacrament devised, which pretended to purify the soul and reconcile sinners to God. Confession, therefore, is by no means a primitive institution; it is a comparatively late creation, due solely to the ambition of the clergy.

Such is Mr. Lea's thesis. Harnack, who is far better acquainted with the documents and history of Christian antiquity than Mr. Lea, explains things somewhat differently. The Church, he tells us, pardoned only the sinner's venial faults, *i. e.*, those committed against the Christian society, but not the sins he had committed against God. The power of remitting offences against God was looked upon in the beginning as a *charisma* or an extraordinary power granted to a few privileged men;

no one regarded it as a power given by God to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Harnack's thesis in the main is identical with Lea's. The power which the Catholic priest pretends to possess of pardoning sin in the Sacrament of Penance is an usurped power: penance did not in the beginning have any sacramental character whatever. In all the writings of Protestant theologians and controversialists, this thesis is defended with more or less completeness. About two years ago (1912) André Lagarde maintained it in an article which appeared in the *Revue d'Histoire et de Littérature Religieuses*, entitled *Did Pope Gregory Know Anything About Confession?* Historically speaking, this is the strongest objection that modern private judgment and free thought can bring forward against the Sacrament of Penance. We purpose to discuss this thesis in the light of both facts and documents. At the outset let us determine the precise object of the discussion.

The Sacrament of Penance comprises on the part of the penitent three principal acts: contrition, confession, and satisfaction; on the part of the confessor who administers it one act only, absolution. Our adversaries have no difficulty whatever regarding contrition and satisfaction. Sorrow for sin committed and the desire to atone for it being essentially acts of the virtue of penance, and indispensable conditions for the cleansing of the soul from sin, have always been regarded by the Church as necessary for the reconciling of sinners. Our adversaries grant this without question. All their objections are directed against confession and absolution. They maintain that confession was not required from the beginning for the remission of sins; that the penitent was never called upon to make a spontaneous and secret avowal of his

sins in order to enable the bishop to judge his personal guilt and determine the penalty it deserved; that absolution was not given in virtue of a power conferred by Jesus Christ upon His Church, nor did it really pardon sin and reconcile the sinner with God.

We intend to study carefully the documents of the early Church, and see whether these denials have any basis in fact. In this study we will prescind for the moment from all consideration of the different forms, solemn or private, that penance assumed at different times. On the other hand, we will not drag out the discussion by trying to prove in turn all the truths denied by our opponents. That would take us too long, and force us to repeat ourselves unnecessarily. We propose using the regressive method, *i. e.*, we will start from the Middle Ages and go back to the time of our Lord, century by century, calling attention to the most decisive testimonies in the early Church writers on the points in controversy. We will then try to interpret briefly and accurately the witnessses we bring forward. This method may prove a bit dry and tedious, but in the present instance we consider it the most efficacious method of meeting the attacks of our non-Catholic critics.

## I.

Let us take as our starting point the end of the eighth century, and, for our first document, consult the second capitulary of Théodolphus, Bishop of Orléans, to his clergy. Théodolphus (+821), one of the most illustrious bishops of his time, had been the friend of the Emperor Charlemagne. This is his description of the ordinary rite of penance in his time. The penitent at



first kneels in the sight of God before the priest to whom he is about to confess. Then he confesses all the sins he can remember having committed since his youth—the bishop is evidently speaking of a general confession—not merely his evil deeds, but also all his evil words and thoughts. Should his memory fail him, or should shame prevent his continuing, it is the priest's duty to question him. This questioning, like the self-examination of the penitent, should deal chiefly with the seven capital sins, of which pride is the chief. Théodolphus remarks that this questioning should be prudently conducted, for there are many sins mentioned in the penitential books, which for good reasons ought not be called to the penitent's attention. After the confession is over, the penitent must promise to renounce his sins and do penance for them. The confessor then imposes a penance proportionate to the penitent's sins and their circumstances, recites the seven penitential Psalms, together with the prayers mentioned in the sacramentary, and immediately absolves the penitent.<sup>1</sup>

If we eliminate from this description the long prayers recited by the confessor before he gives absolution, we find that Théodolphus mentions not merely the essentials, but even the externals of our present Sacrament of Penance. We know, therefore, to a certainty how the people of France went to confession towards the close of the eighth century. There are many other witnesses to be cited for this same period. First of all Alcuin (735-804), who speaks of the necessity of confessing one's sins to a priest as well as to God,<sup>2</sup> and who writes a short instruction on confession for the use of the children of the school of St. Martin of Tours. St.

<sup>1</sup>*P. L.*, vol. cv., col. 217-219.

<sup>2</sup>*Epist.*, cxii.

Boniface of Mayence (+755), the great apostle of Germany, advises confessors, on account of the perils of the day, to absolve their penitents immediately after their confession.<sup>3</sup> St. Chrodegand, Bishop of Metz (742-764), enacts a law obliging his clergy to confess their sins at least twice a year, once at the beginning of Lent, and a second time between August 15th and November 1st.<sup>4</sup> The Venerable Bede (+735), writing five hundred years before St. Thomas, thus comments upon the words of Jesus Christ conferring the power of the keys upon St. Peter: "There is no doubt whatever that the power of binding, which seems to have been given by our Savior to St. Peter alone, was also given to the other Apostles . . . . . Moreover, it is a ministry bestowed upon the whole Church in the person of the bishops and priests. After having examined (by confession) into the sinner's condition of soul, the Church mercifully delivers him (by absolution) from the fear of eternal death if she perceives that he is truly and humbly penitent; if, on the contrary, he remains obdurate in his sin, she declares him subject to eternal torments."<sup>5</sup>

It is therefore evident that the Christians of the eighth century knew all about our Sacrament of Penance. Let us now go back a century further, and question a bishop, who, although not an original thinker, is all the more valuable a witness, inasmuch as he was a most careful and erudite compiler of Catholic traditions. We refer to St. Isidore of Seville (+636). In two passages of his works he mentions penance.<sup>6</sup> He declares that there are two kinds of penance; the one absolutely secret, which has no other witness but God; the other an official penance which

<sup>3</sup>*Statuta*, xxx.

<sup>4</sup>*Regula Canonicorum*, xiv.

<sup>5</sup>Hom. ii., 16.

<sup>6</sup>*Etymol.*, vi., 19, 71-79: *De Ecc. Off.*, ii., 17.

requires the ministry of the priest. This second penance comprises four different acts. First, the *fructuosa confessio*, a confession which ought to be fruitful, because it gives back life to the soul; second, sorrow for sin; third, reparation for sins confessed; and, fourth, absolution. This absolution is not merely a reconciliation with the Church, but a *mundatio*, or interior purification of soul, effected by the ministry of priest or bishop and extending to all sins, no matter what their enormity or their number. There are no limits to the mercy of God, provided there are no limits to the sinner's repentance. Our next witness, St. Gregory the Great (590-604), is important because frequently our adversaries have quoted him against us. We will omit the many passages of his writings in which St. Gregory speaks of penance in general, and at once bring forward those which deal directly with the confession of the sinner and his absolution by the Church. He treats this question very fully in one of his homilies on the Gospels.<sup>7</sup> The Pope's commentary on the words: "Whose sins ye shall remit," is as follows: "Whose sins ye shall remit, they are remitted them; and whose sins ye shall retain, they are retained." "The Apostles, therefore, have received the Holy Spirit in order to loose sinners from the bonds of their sins. God has made them partakers of His right of judgment; they are to judge in His name and in His place (*vice Dei*). The bishops are the successors of the Apostles, and therefore possess the same right." By these words St. Gregory reaffirms the principle, which is the basis of the entire penitential discipline, viz., the power conferred on the bishops and priests to bind and loose sinners from their sins. If we examine his words carefully, we find that he

<sup>7</sup>Hom. xxvi., 4-6.

does not speak of a mere reconciliation of the sinner with the Church, or of a mere external ceremony, which does not affect the soul. The Apostles, and after them the bishops, share the divine power of judging (*principatum superni iudicii sortiuntur*); they retain or remit sins in the place of God (*vice Dei*); they either condemn or free their brethren from their sins (*alios damnant vel liberant*); they actually blot out sins (*delent culpas*), as he says elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> The power he speaks of is, then, a real, intimate, and efficacious power, and not the mere carrying out of an external discipline.

The bishop must be just in exercising this power, continues St. Gregory, and, consequently, must know the sins that have been committed, and what penance the sinner has performed for them. (*Videndum est quæ culpa præcessit, aut quæ sit pænitentia secuta.*) He can obtain this exact knowledge of the penitent's sins only by confession, and, therefore, confession is a necessary corollary of the judicial character of the bishop's sentence. If the bishop has an obligation of judging, he must have a knowledge of the case to be judged, and in most cases this is possible only by means of the sinner's confession.

St. Gregory understood this perfectly, and so he calls upon the penitent to make this confession with his own lips (*ore proprio*), and of his own accord (*sponte*);<sup>9</sup> he also declares that this confession, made humbly and sorrowfully, is the beginning of the sinner's spiritual resurrection. The sinner confessing his sins is another Lazarus, living indeed, but still wrapped up in the bonds of sin. Like Lazarus, the sinner rises out of the darkness of sin, and appears in broad daylight in his bonds. It is the duty of the ministers of the Church, as suc-

<sup>8</sup>In Ezech. iii., Hom. ix., 26.

<sup>9</sup>Mor., xxii., 31.

cessors of the Apostles, to free him from these bonds. The absolution of the priest follows the confession of the penitent; the sins confessed are remitted. This is a most tremendous ministry, for those who exercise it are responsible for the forgiveness they unjustly accord or refuse. Besides, those who receive pardon must remember that they are sometimes responsible for the confessor's errors. Let both confessor and penitent then walk in all fear before God, and be most careful to use holily this great gift of His mercy.

These few words contain the substance of St. Gregory's teaching on penance. We cannot see how anyone, unless he deliberately close his eyes to the light, can fail to discover in them all the essentials of our present Sacrament of Penance: confession, contrition, satisfaction, and absolution.

Our next witness is St. Cæsarius, Bishop of Arles (470-542). St. Cæsarius of Arles is a type of those Gallo-Roman bishops who with indefatigable energy tried to retain, in the midst of the barbarian invasions, all that was good in the old Roman civilization, and who were loyally devoted, body and soul, to the Christian people under their charge. His sermons, many of which are extant, are models of popular preaching. He never aims at rhetorical effect, but speaks simply and clearly, so as to be understood by the most humble portion of his audience. He treats of penance in the clearest possible manner. He begins by making a clear-cut distinction between those slight sins of the faithful which can be atoned for by good works, and the grave sins for which penance is absolutely necessary. This penance may be performed publicly or privately, solemnly or secretly, but whatever be its form, the confession of one's sins must always

accompany it. St. Cæsarius in one of his sermons<sup>10</sup> thus sets forth the general law of penance in his time: "It is God's will that we confess our sins not only to Him, but to men; and since it is impossible for us ever to be free from all stain of sin, we must never fail to have recourse to the remedy of confession." In another sermon<sup>11</sup> he says: "The hour will come in which the angels of God will gather the chaff which has grown up in the field of the householder, and binding together in bundles the thieves, adulterers, murderers, liars, and calumniators precipitate them into the flames. Are we of that number? If we are, let us escape damnation by making a sincere confession from the bottom of our hearts (*puro corde*), and fulfill the penance which the priest will give us." He could not express himself more clearly. We are certain then that at the beginning of the sixth century in Southern France, confession was regarded as a necessary condition of divine pardon, and of the exercise of the Church's ministry of forgiveness. The men of that age both knew and practised our Sacrament of Penance.

Our next witness to the same penitential discipline is Victor of Carthage, a Bishop of Mauretania Cæsariensis, in North Africa, whose treatise on penance was for a long time attributed to St. Ambrose.<sup>12</sup> The first part of the treatise is from beginning to end an earnest appeal to the sinner to confess his sins. Victor develops rather fully the classic comparison of the sinner and the sick man which was mentioned by St. Cæsarius. "You are a sinner; you are a wounded man; you are an invalid. If you are anxious to be cured, you must first show your wound to the physician, and tell him the nature of your malady. Will you tell me that

<sup>10</sup>CCLIII., 1.

<sup>11</sup>CCLI.

<sup>12</sup>P. L., xvii., 791 *et seq.*

God knows the evil you have committed? That is perfectly true; but He will not come in person to prescribe the remedy for your cure. The priest and the bishop will tell you what precautions to take, and what salutary penance you must accomplish; you are bound, therefore, to reveal your sins to them." The writer continues to refute the sinner's objections, to answer his doubts, and above all to encourage him by urging him not to despair on account of his frequent falls. "What do you fear? Of what are you afraid? The same Physician is ever ready to cure you. You will never make Him change. You know the remedy He proposes. . . . . What has cured you once, will cure you again. . . . . He Who does not despise the invalid, will not refuse to succor him in his distress."<sup>13</sup>

St. Leo the Great, an ardent lover of antiquity and tradition (440-461), manifested more than any other Pope, perhaps, his horror of disciplinary and doctrinal novelties. "In all things," he writes, "both in the symbol of faith and in the observance of discipline, we follow the laws laid down by the ancients."<sup>14</sup> A great many of his letters, indeed, were written to declare these ancient laws, or to recall them to the minds of those who had forgotten them. In one of his letters,<sup>15</sup> he tells us about the penitential discipline of his time. "I will tell you," he says, "what the ecclesiastical law prescribes concerning the status of penitents. God in His abundant mercy has provided two remedies for the sins of men; they may gain eternal life, not only by the grace of baptism, but also by the remedy of penance. Those who have violated the vows of their baptism may obtain the remission of their sins by condemning

<sup>13</sup>*De Penitentia*, 1, 3, 12, 24. <sup>14</sup>*Epist.*, cxxix., 2. <sup>15</sup>*Epist.*, cviii.

themselves; the divine goodness has so decreed that the pardon of God can only be obtained by sinners through the prayers of the priests. Jesus Christ Himself, the Mediator between God and man, has conferred on the rulers of the Church the power of imposing canonical penance upon sinners who confess their sins, and of allowing them to receive the sacraments of Christ, after they have purified their souls by a salutary satisfaction. . . . . Every Christian, therefore, must examine his conscience, and cease deferring from day to day the hour of his conversion; he ought not to expect to satisfy (God's justice) on his deathbed. It is dangerous for a weak and ignorant man to defer his conversion to the last uncertain hours of his life, when he may be unable to confess and obtain priestly absolution; he ought, when he can, to merit pardon by a full satisfaction for his sins." We ask you to notice in this passage the assertion of the power conferred by God on the rulers of the Church to subject sinners to penance, and to reconcile them not merely with the Church but with Himself. The *indulgentia Dei* is promised them by means of the ecclesiastical ministry. The hope of eternal life itself is theirs through this reconciliation. Sinners can only procure this grace through the supplications of the priest. (*Ut indulgentia Dei nisi supplicationibus sacerdotum nequeat obtineri.*) By this phrase, "the supplications of the priests," we are not to understand any prayers whatsoever that the clergy might offer up for sinners; the words have a precise and definite meaning. We know that the formula of absolution existed in the form of a prayer as late as the thirteenth century. When Pope Leo speaks then of the prayers of the priests, he means the absolution itself which the priest gives in the Sacrament of Penance.



Without the absolution of the priest, there is, as a general rule, no remission of sins. But, as he tells us, this absolution supposes a preliminary confession. The priest absolves the sinner, who has performed the penance prescribed; and he gave this penance at the time he heard the sinner's confession. (*Ut et confitentibus actionem pœnitentiæ darent, et eosdem salubri satisfactione purgatos.....per januam reconciliationis admitterent.*) The Pope insists strongly upon the penitent's not deferring his accusation of sin and his reconciliation until the end of his life, for at that moment all effective satisfaction may be impossible; the penitent may not have time enough to make his confession or the priest have time enough to absolve him. (*Quo vix inveniat spatium vel confessio pœnitentis, vel reconciliatio sacerdotis.*)

We will next study the penitential discipline of the fourth century. The period which goes from St. Augustine to St. Athanasius was certainly the most brilliant in the history of the early Church. To save time we will quote these testimonies in the briefest manner possible.

Our opponents assert that, when the Church pardoned sinners, she did not act in virtue of the power of the keys, nor was her absolution a part of her ordinary, divine magisterium. St. Augustine (354-430) answered this objection in the fifth century, both in his commentary on St. John<sup>16</sup> and in one of his sermons.<sup>17</sup> He clearly taught that independently of the Church no sins were forgiven, for she had received from Jesus Christ in St. Peter the power of the keys to retain or to remit sin. St. Ambrose (340-397) commences his treatise on penance<sup>18</sup> by demonstrating the power of the priests to remit sins, not in their own name, but as ministers and instru-

<sup>16</sup>*Tract.*, cxxiv., 5.

<sup>17</sup>CCXCV., 2.

<sup>18</sup>*De Pœnitentia.*

ments of God. St. Pacian, Bishop of Barcelona (+390), wrote two letters<sup>19</sup> against the Novatians, to prove that bishops have the right of pardoning repentant sinners, because they have received from Jesus Christ the right to bind and loose. This right is not a privilege accorded to their personal sanctity; it belongs to them, inasmuch as they are the successors of the Apostles (*ex apostolico jure*).

Our opponents assert again that the Church of this period did not truly remit sins, but that the pardon she granted was merely an external reconciliation with the Christian community. But if there were any truth in this contention, the testimonies of the Fathers we have quoted would be utterly incomprehensible. The Novations, for instance, declared that God alone could remit sins, and restore supernatural life to the soul. The Fathers who wrote in defence of the Catholic doctrine would have granted this contention, if they had considered that the priest's absolution merely connoted reconciliation with the Church. Now, as a matter of fact, what did they teach? They taught that God was indeed the primary author of the remission of sins and of the soul's cleansing; but that both this remission and this cleansing were effected by God through the priest as His minister and instrument. St. Pacian writes: "God alone, you (the Novatians) tell me, can pardon sins. Granted. But His divine power is exercised by means of His priests." St. Ambrose says, "Yes, it is the Holy Spirit who remits sins; but He does so through the ministry of men. . . . They pardon sins, not in their own name, but in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup>*Epist. ad Sympron.*, i., 6; iii., 7.

<sup>20</sup>*Lib. exhort. ad pæn.*, 6-8.

Our opponents further declare that obligatory, detailed, auricular confession did not exist at this period. This is simply not true. For St. Pacian says in one of his sermons: "The first thing a sinner must do to have his sins pardoned is to confess them, and to lay bare the wounds of his soul."<sup>21</sup> (*Desinite vulneratam tegere conscientiam.*) The comparison of the penitent confessing his sins with Lazarus coming out of a tomb, which was used by St. Gregory the Great, was not original with him, for he borrowed it from St. Augustine. Long before St. Gregory's time, St. Augustine<sup>22</sup> and St. Jerome<sup>23</sup> (331-(340) 420) had remarked that in order to determine exactly the penance to impose upon a sinner, the confessor, bishop or priest, was bound to know in detail through the penitent's confession the different sins he had committed. A more explicit testimony still may be found in Paulinus, the biographer and secretary of St. Ambrose. "Ambrose," he writes, "rejoiced with those who rejoiced, and wept with those who wept. Every time, indeed, that a sinner confessed to him in order to be admitted to penance, he wept in such a way that he forced the sinner to weep with him. . . . He never mentioned to anyone the crimes that sinners confessed to him, unless to God with Whom he interceded (for the sinner). He left to future bishops a good example; they were to intercede with God for sinners rather than accuse them before the tribunals of men."<sup>24</sup> This certainly is a description of confession, detailed, spontaneous, auricular, and secret. Moreover, these

<sup>21</sup>Sermon LXVII., 2, 3; CCCLII., 8.

<sup>22</sup>Enchiridion, LXV.; *De fide et operibus*, 48; Sermon LXXXII.,

11.

<sup>23</sup>In Matt. xvi. 19; in Ecclesiast. xii. 4.

<sup>24</sup>*Vita sancti Ambrosii*, 39.

words of Paulinus interpret exceptionally well the meaning of that prayer which Ambrose inserted in his book on Penance: "Above all, O Lord, grant me the grace to have compassion from the bottom of my heart upon sinners. . . . Grant that every time a sinner reveals his sins to me, I may feel pity for him, and instead of proudly rebuking him, weep and lament with him."<sup>25</sup>

## II.

Having studied the penitential discipline and the practice of the Sacrament of Penance in the Western Church from the fourth century onwards, we will now turn to the Eastern Church to see if its teaching is identical. It is rather peculiar to observe that in the tenth and the eleventh centuries some writers of the Byzantine decadence maintained that the power of pardoning sins was a privilege accorded by God to certain holy men, rather than an inherent right of the official hierarchy. In accordance with this theory, certain lay monks, under the pretext that their lives were holier than the lives of the secular clergy, began to hear confessions themselves, and did their utmost to prevent the parish priests from doing so. No one for a moment thought that they were warranted in their action by the ancient penitential discipline; on the contrary their claim to pardon was condemned as an abuse alien to the Gospel of Christ. Anastasius Sinaita<sup>26</sup> (+*circ.* 710), Theodoret of Cyrus<sup>27</sup> (386 or 393-458), St. Isidore of Pelusium<sup>28</sup> (+*circ.* 440), St. Cyril of Alexandria<sup>29</sup> (+444), St. Chrysos-

<sup>25</sup>*De Penitentia*, ii., 73.

<sup>26</sup>*Quæstiones*, vi.

<sup>27</sup>*Quæstiones* in Lev. xv.

<sup>28</sup>*Epist.*, i., 338.

<sup>29</sup>In Lucan., v., 24; vii., 28.

tom<sup>30</sup> (344-407), St. Basil<sup>31</sup> (331-379), the monk Jacob Aphraates of Mar Matthaëus<sup>32</sup> (*circ.* 345), and St. Ephrem Syrus<sup>33</sup> (306-373), all teach that the bishop and the priest remit sins in virtue of the God-given power of the keys. They all teach clearly a real remission of sins. Anastasius remarks: "It is God, indeed, Who primarily pardons sin, but He does not do so immediately of Himself; He does so through His priests, who are His co-workers (*sunergoi*)."<sup>34</sup> St. Chrysostom insists on the fact that the priests possess the pardoning power; they do not merely declare sins remitted by God, but they themselves really pardon them. One could not express the Catholic doctrine more clearly.

The three conditions necessary in order that the priest may pardon sin are contrition, the will to satisfy for sins, and confession. This is stated plainly in a penitential ritual attributed to John Mandakuni, a Greek patriarch of Greater Armenia, towards the end of the fifth century.<sup>34</sup> We read as follows: "The priest sits down, making the penitent kneel beside him in order to make his confession. The priest first enumerates the different sins in turn, the penitent, in the meanwhile, replying to the confessor's questioning concerning his sins." The priest then recites some prayers, and finally absolves the penitent.

We find the same penitential discipline among the Syrians. A most invaluable testimony may be found in the letters or *Demonstrationes* of the monk Aphraates, who wrote between the years 337 and 345. Aphraates urges

<sup>30</sup>*De Sacerdotio*, iii., 6.

<sup>31</sup>*Regulæ brev. tract.*, CCLXXXVIII.

<sup>32</sup>*Demonstratio*, vii., 11.

<sup>33</sup>*Opera* ii., p. 440.

<sup>34</sup>*Rituale Armenorum*, p. 294. Edited by Conybeare, Oxford, 1905.

sinners to set aside all false shame, and confess their sins to the physicians of their souls, for this confession is necessary for their healing. He then speaks directly to the spiritual physicians, "who hold the keys of the gates of heaven, and open these gates to penitents," recommending them not to reveal the confessions they have heard, and never to refuse pardon to one who sincerely demands it.<sup>35</sup>

As the Armenians and Syrians learned their faith and discipline from the Greeks, it is natural to expect that all three would agree in their teaching on the Sacrament of Penance. St. John Climacus (525-600) writes: "Without confession, no one can receive pardon for his sins."<sup>36</sup> He tells us further that this confession must be sincere, humble, and sorrowful even to the attitude of the penitent. In the beginning it was always secret, and comprised secret as well as public sins. We have testimony to the same effect in St. Isidore of Pelusium in the fifth century,<sup>37</sup> and St. Basil,<sup>38</sup> and St. Chrysostom<sup>39</sup> in the fourth. St. Chrysostom's name calls to our minds an important fact in the history of penance at Constantinople, which confirms what we have just been saying. The historian Socrates tells us that, on occasion of the Novatian schism about the year 240, the bishops of Thrace decided that henceforth a priest penitentiary was to be appointed in every church to take the bishop's place; *i. e.*, a priest to hear confessions, and to see that the penitents accomplished the penance imposed upon them. This institution was suppressed about the year 391 by the patriarch Nectarius, because of a scandal due to the indiscretion

<sup>35</sup>*Demonst.*, vii., 3 *et seq.*

<sup>37</sup>*Epist.*, v., 261.

<sup>39</sup>In Gen., Hom. xxx., 5. Cf. Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.*, vi., 21.

<sup>36</sup>*Scala Paradisi*, grad. iv.

<sup>38</sup>*Epist.*, cxcix., 34.

of the penitentiary of Constantinople. It seems indeed that Nectarius went even further and suspended, for a time at least, the obligation of confessing one's sins before communion. This was too severe a measure, says Socrates, for the abuse in question was not widespread or common; indeed, the remedy was far worse than the evil.<sup>40</sup>

St. Chrysostom, who succeeded Nectarius as patriarch, found things in this state. He did not wish to combat too vigorously the laws passed by his predecessor; but he used all his eloquence to offset their evil effects, and to lead the faithful back gradually to the normal practice of confession. This is a very good proof that the penitential discipline of the Greek Church comprised confession, and all the essential elements of our present Sacrament of Penance.

### III.

We have now reached the beginning of the third century, a period in which our opponents hope to prove their contention against us. One hundred or two hundred years ago, critics often used to assert that the Christianity of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries was altogether different from the Christianity of modern times. But in our time the non-Catholic scholar who is at all acquainted with the results of modern historical research, would not dare make such a statement. The first three centuries are now the battle ground of controversy. Our opponents boldly ask us to give proofs of our belief drawn from that obscure and chaotic period, feeling confident that they have given us an impossible task. Let us care-

<sup>40</sup>*Hist. Eccles.*, v., 19.

fully study this period from the viewpoint of the Sacrament of Penance, and we certainly will be able to throw more light on the subject than they deem possible.

Origen's (185-254) literary activity extended over the first half of the third century. In his numerous works he had many an occasion to speak of penance, and the manner in which it was performed. He writes in one of his commentaries on the Psalms: *Quoniam iniquitatem meam annuntiabo (pronuntio)*.<sup>41</sup> "I have often said that by this avowal of iniquity, we must understand the confession of sin. You see then that the divine Scriptures teach us that we ought not to hide our sins within our breasts." He then uses the well-known classic comparison of the early Fathers: "When you have eaten some indigestible food, and your stomach is filled with an excessive quantity of humor, you will suffer until you have gotten rid of it. So in like manner sinners, who hide and retain their sins within their breasts, become sick therefrom almost to death. If, however, they accuse themselves, confess their sins, and vomit forth their iniquity, they will utterly drive out of their souls the principle of evil. Consider carefully, he adds, whom you choose to hearken to your sins. Know well the character of the physician to whom you intend to relate the nature of your sickness; (choose one) who understands human weakness, sorrows with those who shed tears, and has compassion upon those who mourn for their sins. . . . . Then, if he gives you advice, follow it; if he judges and thinks that your sickness is of such a nature that it should be revealed publicly in church for the edification of the brethren and your own more effective cure, do not hesitate to do what he tells you. You are bound to

<sup>41</sup>Ps. xxxvii. 9.



weigh well the advice of this skillful physician." These words are clear enough. He is evidently speaking of a secret confession of secret sins to a spiritual physician. Who this physician is Origen does not explicitly state, although the fact that he obliges the penitent to perform public penance in church points to a priest or bishop as confessor.

In one of his homilies upon Leviticus,<sup>42</sup> he speaks of the different ways of obtaining pardon for sins in the Christian dispensation. The seventh is: "the painful way of penance, for the sinner washes his couch with his tears, is overwhelmed with sorrow day and night, and is not ashamed to confess his sins to the priest of the Lord, and to ask pardon for them according to the Scriptures: 'I will accuse myself of my iniquity to the Lord, and Thou wilt pardon the impiety of my heart.'" In another homily,<sup>43</sup> he writes: "The priests of the Church, indeed, like Jesus Christ, (Him) Who instituted the priesthood, have the right to hear the sins of the people, and to pardon them. 'If the layman commits sin, he is unable of himself to blot it out; he must call upon the levite, he must have recourse to the priest; nay, at times, he must have recourse to one greater than the priest, *i. e.*, the bishop, to obtain pardon."<sup>44</sup>

Origen is an invaluable witness for Egypt and for Palestine, because he taught in both those countries. With our next witness, St. Cyprian (200-258), we return to the Latin Church, and learn the teaching of Carthage on penance. The circumstances which induced St. Cyprian to pay special attention to the Church's penitential discipline are well known. During the persecu-

<sup>42</sup>In Lev. ii. 4. <sup>43</sup>In Lev., Hom. v., 3. <sup>44</sup>In Numb., Hom. x., 1.

tion of Decius in 250 A. D., many Christians of North Africa had shamefully apostatized. Some, terrified by the menace of torture, had really sacrificed to idols (*sacrificati*), while others by bribery had obtained from some complacent government official certificates falsely declaring that they had sacrificed (*libellatici*); both classes of apostates were known by the general term of *lapsi*, or the fallen. When the persecution had ceased in 251, these apostates asked to be reconciled and to return to the Church's fold. St. Cyprian was not opposed on principle to their being reinstated; on the contrary, he desired it with all his heart. But, backed by a Council of his own bishops and the letters of Roman clergy, he required the *lapsi* who were not *in extremis* to perform a penance proportioned to the gravity of their sin before absolution was granted them. If they had actually sacrificed to idols, this penance was to be lifelong. Many of these apostates considered this decision too severe; they therefore at once started a schism under a priest named Novatus, and later on, adopting a most exaggerated rigorism, organized an independent church, which lasted for many years.

St. Cyprian thus writes in one of his letters: "Whereas of old sinners for slight sins performed their penance for the prescribed time, and, according to the laws of ecclesiastical discipline, came to the *exomologesis*, and were allowed to partake of the Eucharist after the imposition of hands by the bishop and the clergy. In these days of trial and persecution the *lapsi* wish to be admitted to communion at once. Some priests are offering up in their name the sacrifice, and allowing them to receive the Eucharist before they have done penance, accomplished the *exomologesis*, or had the hands of the bishop and clergy

imposed upon them. Yet it is written: "He that eateth the bread and drinketh the chalice of the Lord unworthily, is guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord."<sup>45</sup>

St. Cyprian is indignant at such a violation of the laws of the Church. He wishes the *lapsi* first to do penance and to accomplish the *exomologesis*, *i. e.*, the accusation of their sins and the atonement therefor; then they may receive pardon from the bishop and the clergy. There is no doubt whatever about the views of St. Cyprian on this point. He again discusses this question in his treatise *De Lapsis*. He speaks of certain Christians who intended to apostatize, although they actually had not done so. It was a question, therefore, merely of an internal sin. St. Cyprian thus decides this case of conscience: "Although these Christians have not committed the crime of either the *sacrificati* or the *libellatici*, yet, because they have thought of apostatizing, they are bound to accuse themselves in all simplicity and sorrow to the priests of the Lord, accomplish the *exomologesis* of their conscience, and unburden their souls." Again he writes: "Let each one of you, my brethren, confess his sins, while his confession may still be received, and his satisfaction and the absolution of the priest are pleasing to the Lord."<sup>46</sup>

In the writings, therefore, of St. Cyprian and of Origen, we find all the essential elements of the Sacrament of Penance. In fact, if we go back thirty or forty years further, we will still be able to discover them. A decree of Pope Callistus, which greatly angered Tertullian,<sup>47</sup> had just been published in Rome (217-222). The Pope convinced that adulterers and fornicators were being treated with too great a severity, had mitigated in their

<sup>45</sup>*Epist.*, xvi., 2.

<sup>46</sup>*De Lapsis*, 28, 29.

<sup>47</sup>*De Pudicitia*, ch. i.

regard the ancient discipline in order that they might not despair. He declared that their sins would be remitted them after they had performed a just penance. To justify this decree, he cited examples from the Sacred Scriptures, and, to prove his authority, quoted the words of our Lord to St. Peter and his successors: "Upon this rock I will build My Church. . . . And I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven."<sup>48</sup>

We learn these details from Tertullian (160-220 (245?)) who, once he had become a Montanist, questioned the right and power of the Pope. In his excessive rigorism, he was angry with Pope Callistus who, in virtue of the power of the keys, pardoned fornicators their sins.<sup>49</sup> Tertullian had no notion, however, of denying all pardoning power to the bishops; he merely denied their power of remitting certain capital sins, which he declared God alone could pardon. The idea he gives of the exercises of penance in his treatises, *De Penitentia* and *De Pudicitia*, is identical with the teaching of St. Cyprian. The sinner must first confess his sins to the bishop or his delegate. This confession enables the bishop to determine the satisfaction or penance the sinner must perform (*quatenus satisfactio confessione disponitur*); then, when the penance has been performed, the bishop grants pardon (*veniam ab episcopo consequi poterit*).<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup>Matt. xvi. 18, 19.

<sup>49</sup>*De Pudicitia*, i., 18, 21.

<sup>50</sup>*De Penitentia*, 9; *De Pudicitia*, 18. The Abbé d'Alès in his late work, the *Edict of Callistus*, holds that Tertullian in his *De Pudicitia* did deny the authority of the Pope to pardon (*L'Edit de Calliste*, p. 177. Paris: G. Beauchesne et Cie. 1914).

The first witness of the second century is St. Irenæus (140-193 (241?)) who wrote his treatise *Adversus Hæreses* about A. D. 180. In this work he deals with certain forms of Gnosticism, and shows how they contradicted the ancient tradition of the Church. Incidentally, he has a word to say about the penitential discipline of the period. He tells us about certain women who had apostatized, after they had been seduced by the Gnostic Marcion and his disciples. The brethren did not abandon them in their sins, and after a time some of these women repented. St. Irenæus tells us that they condemned themselves to perform the public *exomologesis*, i. e., as Tertullian will explain later on, they confessed their sins and accepted the public penance imposed upon them. Others among them could not summon up enough courage to do this. Their sins had been committed in secret, and they were frightened at the idea of performing a public penance, which would publish them to the world. They despaired of leading the divine life, and either abandoned the Christian community, or adopted an absolutely equivocal attitude.<sup>51</sup> St. Irenæus does not tell us explicitly that these repentant women were pardoned. It is clear, however, from what he says that they were pardoned, at least at the hour of death. A lifelong penance was imposed upon them; but they died reconciled with God and with the Church.

St. Irenæus is the most ancient writer who gives us precise details about the Sacrament of Penance. By that we do not mean to imply that the subject of penance in general was not discussed by the writers who preceded him. We have for example a work called *The Shepherd* (A. D. 136-145), written by Hermas, a brother

<sup>51</sup>*Adv. Hæres.*, i., 13, 5, 7.

of Pope Pius I. (*circ.* 140-155), which proves the necessity and efficacy of penance. But Hermas, whose book is filled with visions and symbols, speaks very obscurely of the Church's rôle in the reconciliation of penitents. Other documents still more ancient, like the so-called *Epistle of Barnabas* (96-120?) and the *Didache*, or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (120-165?), speak of a confession of sins which ought to be made in church. Unfortunately, these brief texts are not explicit enough to be of any great value.

We should not wonder at the comparative silence of these early records. For the historian, Eusebius of Cæsarea (*circ.* 265-340), who knew more about the literature of the primitive Church than any other man in the fourth century, tells us that before the time of St. Irenæus very little had been written by ecclesiastical writers. The few documents that have come down to us, consist chiefly of occasional letters.

But it would be perfectly puerile to imagine that this long train of tradition outlined above had no connection whatever with the Gospel, or that this sacramental discipline which we have seen practised everywhere throughout Christendom, did not go back to Jesus Christ Himself. St. Irenæus, whom we mentioned a little while ago, was a disciple of St. Polycarp, and St. Polycarp himself was a disciple of St. John. The years are few, therefore, that separate St. Irenæus from St. John. If we open the Gospel which St. John wrote less than one hundred years before the work of St. Irenæus, we read that on the first Easter Sunday the risen Christ entered the doors of the Upper Room where the Apostles were gathered together, and greeted them with the words, "Peace be to you." The disciples, therefore, were glad

when they saw the Lord. He then continued: "As the Father hath sent Me, I also send you. When He had said this, He breathed on them; and He said to them: Receive ye the Holy Ghost, Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained."<sup>52</sup> These words recorded by St. John do not stand alone. This power of retaining and remitting sins had already been promised to St. Peter and the Apostles in the more general formula preserved by St. Matthew: "And I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose upon earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven."<sup>53</sup> Some non-Catholic critics have tried to prove that these texts refer directly to the power of baptizing, *i. e.*, of remitting sins by baptism; although one of them, Loisy, admits that "we must grant that the authority of the Apostles is not limited to the power of baptizing. If the Church may refuse baptism to the unworthy as she accords it to the well-disposed, she maintains in regard to the sins of the baptized a power which may be exercised under a positive and negative form, by the conceding or refusing of absolution according to circumstances." These texts prove that from the beginning the Christian community claimed such a power for itself, and that she thought it came from the Risen Savior just like her power to preach the Gospel.<sup>54</sup>

It is, therefore, in virtue of this power that Jesus Christ has given them, and by the power of the Holy Spirit breathed upon them, that the Apostles and their successors have the right to bind and loose, to remit or

<sup>52</sup>John xx. 21-23.

<sup>53</sup>Matt. xvi. 19. Cf. xviii. 18.

<sup>54</sup>*Autour d'un petit livre*, p. 249.

**Sacrament of Penance.** In ancient times this was not the case, but satisfaction, or penance strictly so-called, inasmuch as it was the most laborious and the longest part, of the sacrament, was most insisted upon, both by priest and penitent. We must not, therefore, be surprised to find that the early Fathers concentrated all their efforts upon satisfaction for sin, and that as a consequence satisfaction seems at times to be their only theme and object. But their insistence upon satisfaction did not, as we have seen, exclude the idea or the practice of confession.

To conclude, Jesus Christ gave His Church the power of purifying the conscience, of retaining and pardoning sins, of binding and loosing. This power must be exercised under the form of a judgment; therefore, there is, in a true sense of the word, a tribunal of penance. Strong with this divine authority, and relying on the words of our Savior, the Church has from the beginning pardoned men their sins, and reconciled them with God, after they had confessed them and performed the prescribed penance. To maintain, therefore, that the Sacrament of Penance is a human invention is unreasonable, and clearly contrary to the facts of history.



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