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## An Authentic Development of Doctrine? The Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Patristic Writings

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PROVIDENCE COLLEGE

**An Authentic Development of Doctrine?  
The Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Patristic Writings**

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of Arts in Theology

By

Sister Mary Barbara Keiser, O.P.

Providence, Rhode Island

2023



## **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the doctrinal development of the sacrament of Reconciliation in the writings of the Fathers of the Church. It is believed by several modern theologians that the sacrament of Reconciliation is a man-made practice that has been imposed on Christians by the Church. It is also believed that the sacramental life of the Church as we know it today is in direct contrast with early Christianity and even contradicts what was handed to the apostles by Christ. In response to this misunderstanding, I wish to show how the sacrament of Reconciliation as we know it today has continuity with the thinking of the early Church Fathers. To do this, I will first use Saint John Henry Newman's writings to explain the proper understanding of the development of doctrine and what is meant by the unchanging, yet dynamic nature of Church teaching. Using the Church Fathers' writings, I will then trace how the Church's understanding of Penance has developed over time and show that the practice of Confession as we know it today was not arbitrarily constructed by man but has organically developed out of what Christ handed onto the apostles. It is clear from the Patristic writings that the Church has always believed in the need for confession after baptism and that the Church has always believed that Christ conferred to His Church the authority to reconcile sinners to God.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the doctrinal development of the sacrament of Reconciliation in the writings of the Fathers of the Church. There have been some theologians<sup>1</sup> and writers who have proposed that the origins of the sacrament of Reconciliation and its current celebration can only be found in the Middle Ages. However, there is evidence that the sacrament of Reconciliation has been celebrated in the Church since the earliest times, including directly after the apostolic age. Much development regarding the theology of the sacrament of Reconciliation has occurred over the course of the history of the Church. This thesis will give an explanation of that development in the early Church by focusing on the Patristic writings beginning in the post-apostolic age and ending in the seventh century (before the early Middle Ages). This study will demonstrate that the Church has always held the following doctrine: the ministers of the Church have been given the power from God to forgive sins and the sacrament of Penance has always been celebrated or practiced in some form since the very beginning of the Church. For the purposes of this study, the sacrament of Reconciliation will most often be referred to as the sacrament of Penance since that is the term used throughout the early centuries of the Church to refer to the practice of doing penance for sin in order to be reconciled with God and the Church.

This paper will begin by briefly exploring what is meant by the development of doctrine. It will explain how the Church's understanding of theological truths develops over time, and therefore, the theology regarding certain doctrines and the practices that pertain to those

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Charles Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences in the Latin Church* (Philadelphia: Lea Brothers & Co., 1896).

doctrines may change or develop without compromising the integrity of the doctrinal truth. The development of doctrine does not mean that doctrines are invented or produced by the will of certain Church leaders. Truths of the Catholic faith are not merely the individual opinions or reflections of certain theologians whose views have become popular over time. The development of the Church's doctrine is an essential part of the growth of the Church, and this has occurred in regard to the sacrament of Penance.

This thesis will then examine references to the sacrament of Penance in the Fathers of the Church. This examination will begin with the writings of *The Didache*, Saint Ignatius of Antioch, the *Letter of Barnabas*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas* in the post-apostolic age. The practice of penance in the third and fourth centuries will then be analyzed by referring to the writings of Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, Hippolytus, the *Didascalía Apostolorum*, Tertullian, Saint Cyprian, Origen, Aphrahat the Persian Sage, Saint Ambrose of Milan, Saint John Chrysostom, and the Rule of Saint Basil. Finally, this study will conclude by examining the practice of the sacrament of penance at the end of the patristic period in the writings of Saint Augustine, Saint Jerome, and the Irish Penitentials. These writings will demonstrate how the understanding and ecclesial practice of the sacrament of Reconciliation has developed over time while remaining faithful to the doctrinal truth of the forgiveness of sins through the ministers of the Church.

Interest in this topic has arisen from a great love of the early patristic writings coupled with the experience of being a teacher answering questions regarding the sacrament of Reconciliation. Through teaching, it has become evident that the sacrament of Reconciliation is often misunderstood. In many instances, students have raised questions about this sacrament and its origins. This is especially the case in predominantly Protestant regions where Catholic students often compare their beliefs to those of their friends in non-Catholic Christian

denominations. A greater understanding of the origins of this sacrament can help to better understand the sacrament, including its great beauty and purpose.

Along with the desire to be able to address my students' questions regarding the sacrament of Penance, I also pursued this topic because I discovered a great love and appreciation of the patristic writings. There is something both beautiful and enlightening about reading the works of the earliest theologians of the Church. They did not have the benefit of years of understanding and doctrinal development that we can benefit from today. They had to explore and explain these truths without the help of other theologians and centuries of doctrinal development. There is a profound simplicity in the writings of the Patristic Fathers as they explained the truths of the faith. One could think that perhaps the earliest writings of the Church were cryptic and difficult to understand, but, in fact, it is quite the opposite. The Church Fathers were simply trying to understand the truths of the faith and lead others to salvation. It is evident from their writings that these men were not just intelligent theologians, but they were first and foremost Christian believers in love with Christ and His Church. In their explanations, the Church Fathers' goal was to lead people away from error and closer to Christ. There is a beauty and insight in reading how the greatest minds of the early Church understood the faith, and their writings possess the capacity to bring us back to the basics of the faith and lead us closer to Christ in all His simplicity.



# Chapter 1

## The Development of Doctrine

### Development of Doctrine as Growth of a Living Entity

To examine how a specific doctrine of the Church has developed over time, it is first necessary to understand what is meant by the development of doctrine. To aid this process, we will consider Saint John Henry Newman's groundbreaking work *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. This work will be the lens through which we will examine the early writings on the sacrament of Penance.

A hundred years before the *ressourcement* theological movement, Newman was already seeking to return to the sources of Christianity through the writings of the Church Fathers.<sup>2</sup> Newman was a theologian ahead of his time and a precursor of Vatican II, where his influence can be especially seen in the document *Dei Verbum* in which the Council speaks of the development of doctrine.<sup>3</sup> In Newman, the *ressourcement* theologians found a theology that was based in the Church Fathers and kept within the context of history.

Newman's *Essay on the Development of Doctrine* remains essential for a study of the theology of doctrinal development. In this work, Newman addresses the problem regarding the nature of doctrine and dogma. He comes to the conclusion that doctrines naturally and organically develop into dogmas. The Church holds the same truths now that she held at the beginning, but over time, heresies and questions have arisen which have led the Church to explain doctrines more thoroughly and precisely. Newman explains how ideas and doctrines

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<sup>2</sup> Ian Ker, *Newman on Vatican II* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University press, 2014), xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Ker, xiii, 2.

develop and then applies those principles of development to the truths of the faith. These same principles can also be applied to the development of the doctrine of Penance.

Newman would argue that the seed of truth is in the living tradition of the Church throughout the centuries, and it grows and develops as other living things grow and develop. In one of his tracts, Newman states that the truths of the faith were “all hidden, as it were, in the Church’s bosom from the first, and brought out into form according to the occasion.”<sup>4</sup> In his *Essay*, Newman tries to address those critics who held that the doctrines of the Catholic Faith were additions and inventions. He wants to answer the question of whether these teachings were unlawful creations of an authoritative Church or whether they were indeed authentic developments of apostolic and scriptural doctrines. Newman describes the theory of the development of doctrine as a “hypothesis to account for a difficulty.”<sup>5</sup> The difficulty to which Newman refers is the reality that the Church of today can seem so far distant from the Christianity of apostolic times as to be a different religion entirely. This is what Newman seeks to address and resolve in his essay. His insights will provide a foundation for understanding the development of Christian doctrine as a whole and how this development can be seen throughout the centuries, specifically in regard to the development of the doctrine of the sacrament of Penance throughout the first seven centuries of Christianity.

Newman begins the introduction to his *Essay* by explaining the theory of the development of doctrine, stating that it is necessary for the high and lofty truths of the Faith to have time to be fully understood and explained. It is not possible for these truths to be fully understood all at once, and therefore, they require a long period of time for deep thought and full

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<sup>4</sup> John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Newman, 30.

comprehension.<sup>6</sup> Newman describes this process of development in terms of growth maturation.<sup>7</sup> The controversies, heresies, and needs of a particular time can cause a doctrine to develop and change over time.<sup>8</sup> Newman points out that this is a natural process where when the times change, a doctrine “changes with them in order to remain the same.”<sup>9</sup> Newman speaks of the development of doctrine in the terms of a seed growing, maturing, and changing as it is nurtured by the soil. Newman concludes that “In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.”<sup>10</sup> Because the Faith is a dynamic and living reality, it must change and develop as all living things must change and develop to reach maturation and perfection.

Newman acknowledges that often the doctrinal developments appear to be different from original doctrine, and he explains that “Ideas and their developments are commonly not identical, the development being but the carrying out of the idea into its consequences.”<sup>11</sup> Newman lists several examples of doctrinal developments, including the “doctrine of Penance [which] may be called a development of the doctrine of Baptism, yet still is a distinct doctrine.”<sup>12</sup> This will be further explained later in Newman’s essay. For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on the doctrinal development of the sacrament of Penance, which, Newman argues, finds its origins in the doctrine of Baptism.

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<sup>6</sup> Newman, 29-30.

<sup>7</sup> Newman, 38.

<sup>8</sup> Newman, 40.

<sup>9</sup> Newman, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Newman, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Newman, 53.

<sup>12</sup> Newman, 53.

Newman admits that many Christians hold that the Catholic Church invents new teachings which contradict those of the apostles and Scripture. Newman recognizes the objections non-Catholic Christians lodge at the Church. He writes, “Accordingly, the common complaint of Protestants against the Church of Rome is, not simply that she has added to the primitive or the Scriptural doctrine, (for this they do themselves), but that she contradicts it, and moreover imposes her additions as fundamental truths under sanction of an anathema.”<sup>13</sup> As time passes, “outward circumstances have changed, and with the change, a different application of the revealed word has of necessity been demanded, that is, a development.”<sup>14</sup> Newman even asserts that not only is doctrinal development necessary, but it has always been part of God’s plan: “Thus developments of Christianity are proved to have been in the contemplation of its Divine Author, by an argument parallel to that by which we infer intelligence in the system of the physical world.”<sup>15</sup> Newman points out and gives several illustrative examples to demonstrate that this method of proof is also used in physical science and scientific proofs. Again, Newman points out that one truth is explained by another until a system is built up as different related questions are raised and answered. He states, “It is not that first one truth is told, then another; but the whole truth or large portions of it are told at once, yet only in their rudiments, or in miniature, and they are expanded and finished in their parts, as the course of revelation proceeds.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Newman, 58.

<sup>14</sup> Newman, 63.

<sup>15</sup> Newman, 63.

<sup>16</sup> Newman, 64.

Newman explains that all doctrines and teachings of the Church have their origins in Sacred Scripture, and no one can claim that he has mastered all the doctrines contained therein.<sup>17</sup> All the teachings of the Church have their origin or roots within Sacred Scripture, and over time, the seed of truth grows develops while still remaining the same seed of truth. The truth has not changed; it is simply explained, understood, and elucidated more fully. Newman states, “It may be added that, in matter of fact, all the definitions or received judgements of the early and medieval Church rest upon definite, even though sometimes obscure sentences of Scripture.”<sup>18</sup> Newman even asserts that the very process of the development of doctrine itself is found in Scripture. In making this assertion, he once again makes reference to the truths of the Faith being seeds that grow and develop as other living things.<sup>19</sup>

All this evidence is proof for Newman that the legitimate development of doctrine is a necessary process that is found in Scripture, is a work of God, and is to be expected and embraced. He writes, “From the necessity, then, of the case, from the history of all sects and parties in religion, and from the analogy and example of Scripture, we may fairly conclude that Christian doctrine admits of formal, legitimate, and true developments, that is of developments contemplated by its Divine Author.”<sup>20</sup> Newman seems to be in awe of this reality. Realizing the implications of verifying and validating the truth of doctrinal development, he concludes:

It has now been made probable that developments of Christianity were but natural, as time went on, and were to be expected; and that these natural and true developments, as being natural and true, were of course contemplated and taken into account by its Author, who in designing the work designed its legitimate results. These, whatever they turn out to be, may be called absolutely ‘the developments’ of Christianity. That beyond

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<sup>17</sup> Newman, 71.

<sup>18</sup> Newman, 72.

<sup>19</sup> Newman, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Newman, 74.

reasonable doubt, there are such is surely a great step gained in the inquiry; it is a momentous fact.<sup>21</sup>

Having established that doctrinal developments are indeed an integral part of Christianity, the next question that Newman seeks to answer is what those developments are and how they are developed. Ultimately, Newman is asking about the nature of these developments. How can they be described? He describes Christianity as “a revelation which comes to us as a revelation, as a whole, objectively, and with a profession of infallibility.”<sup>22</sup> Newman asserts that the whole of revelation in its entirety would unavoidably include doctrinal developments.<sup>23</sup>

Newman argues that the foundational principles develop into comprehensive doctrines. He gives several specific examples of such developments, including the Sacraments, where “Baptism is developed into Confirmation on the one hand; into Penance, Purgatory, and Indulgences on the other.”<sup>24</sup> After giving several other examples, Newman points out that all these developments are united and connected to one another as portions of the whole deposit of Faith. Just as living things grow together and are interconnected and dependent upon one another, the doctrines of the Church grow and develop together as they inform and explain one another. Newman explains that “Nor do these separate developments stand independent of each other, but by cross relations they are connected, and grow together while they grow from one.”<sup>25</sup> Because all doctrines of the Church are connected in this way, Newman asserts that “You must accept the whole or reject the whole; attenuation does but enfeeble, and amputation mutilate.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Newman, 75.

<sup>22</sup> Newman, 79.

<sup>23</sup> Newman, 79-80.

<sup>24</sup> Newman, 94.

<sup>25</sup> Newman, 94.

<sup>26</sup> Newman, 94.

Thus, we could conclude that to accept the doctrine of Baptism and the ritual developments that have occurred over the centuries, would also necessitate that one accepts the doctrinal and ritual developments of the Sacrament of Penance, which is historically connected to and develops from the teachings regarding the Sacrament of Baptism. This is not to say that the Sacrament of Penance had no foundation outside of the Sacrament of Baptism, but it cannot be denied that the historical development surrounding the Sacrament of Penance is very much connected to and bound up in the understanding of the Sacrament of Baptism, the forgiveness of sins, and the need to be reconciled with God.

In his chapter “On the Historical Argument in Behalf of the Existing Developments,” Newman once again argues for the historical developments of doctrine while acknowledging that there can be seemingly little relation of an existing doctrine and the teaching of the Apostles. He states the following:

Certain doctrines come to us, professing to be Apostolic, and possessed of such high antiquity that, though we are only able to assign the date of their formal establishment to the fourth, or the fifth, or the eighth, or the thirteenth century, as it may happen, yet their substance may, for what appears, be coeval with the Apostles, and be expressed or implied in the texts of Scripture.<sup>27</sup>

This is the case in regard to the Sacrament of Penance as will be seen later. Newman himself will illustrate this in regard to the Sacrament of Penance. Newman points out that the historicity of such doctrines is often proof of their authenticity.<sup>28</sup> This can be especially seen in his note regarding an authentic development of doctrine according to the historical needs of the time. Once again, Newman points out the unity and connectedness of such doctrines within the whole context of the truths of the Faith is further proof of their authenticity.<sup>29</sup> He also reminds his

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<sup>27</sup> Newman, 99.

<sup>28</sup> Newman, 99.

<sup>29</sup> Newman, 99.

readers that “there is the high antecedent probability that Providence would watch over His own work, and would direct and ratify those developments of doctrine which were inevitable.”<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, it does seem that God would give guidance to the development of the truths that He Himself revealed to us.

To explain the omission or silence of the Church on certain doctrines until a later time, Newman explains that this is natural and normal. It would not make sense for certain doctrines to be expounded upon or truths to be explained unless there was a need for such an exposition or explanation. It was also necessary to wait for the right time in history to explain certain doctrinal truths. As an example, Newman explains that the early Christians would not “determine the place of the Blessed Mary in our reverence, before they had duly secured, in the affections of the faithful, the supreme glory and worship of God Incarnate, her Eternal Lord and Son.”<sup>31</sup> It would not make sense to give glory to the Mother of Jesus without first determining and developing a more comprehensive understanding of the Incarnation, the hypostatic union, and who Jesus is as both God and man. These doctrines developed according to the needs and circumstances of the time as set forth by God himself. Here, Newman refers to the book of Ecclesiastes which states that “There is ‘a time for every purpose under the heaven;’ ‘a time to keep silence and a time to speak.’”<sup>32</sup> Newman summarizes his argument of the historical development of doctrine when he says the following:

My argument then is this:—that, from the first age of Christianity, its teaching looked towards those ecclesiastical dogmas, afterwards recognized and defined, with (as time went on) more or less determinate advance in the direction of them; till at length that advance became so pronounced, as to justify their definition and to bring it about, and to

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<sup>30</sup> Newman, 100.

<sup>31</sup> Newman, 118.

<sup>32</sup> Newman, 119.



place them in the position of rightful interpretations and keys of the remains and the records in history of the teaching which had so terminated.<sup>33</sup>

Newman gives several examples of doctrines which developed according to the needs of the time. In regard to the doctrine of original sin, he states, “we have here an instance of a doctrine held back for a time by circumstances, yet in the event forcing its way into its normal shape, and at length authoritatively fixed in it, that is, of a doctrine held implicitly, then asserting itself, and at length fully developed.”<sup>34</sup> Newman even goes so far to say that “No doctrine is defined till it is violated.”<sup>35</sup> Here he asserts his argument that often the development of doctrine does not occur until the needs of the times, including heresy and controversy, demand and necessitate such a development.

To conclude, Newman asserts that doctrine must develop over time to meet the historical and cultural needs that arise, and it must be seen within the context of the whole Deposit of Faith. In order to fully understand a doctrine, one must “interpret the words and deeds of the earlier Church by the determinate teaching of the later.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore, it would be completely valid and legitimate to examine the patristic writings on the sacrament of Penance both from the perspective of the teachings of the Apostles and the early Church and from the perspective of the modern practices, teachings, and rituals surrounding this Sacrament. As the practice of Penance developed through the centuries, the theology developed, and the Church grew in her understanding of this sacrament.

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<sup>33</sup> Newman, 122.

<sup>34</sup> Newman, 127.

<sup>35</sup> Newman, 151.

<sup>36</sup> Newman, 155.

## **Development of Doctrine Versus the Corruption of Truth**

In chapter five of his essay, Newman contrasts genuine developments of doctrine with corruptions of doctrine. How does one distinguish between them? What are the signs that a doctrine is a genuine development and not a corruption? How do we know that the seed of the original Apostolic and Scriptural truth is still there? Newman argues that the way to distinguish between a legitimate development of doctrine and a deterioration or corruption of the truth can once again be found in the natural world. Living things change as they grow and mature, but they change in such a way that perfects their nature. Corruption on the other hand, may come from disease, and is an altering and deterioration of the nature of the living thing in such a way that it does damage to the nature of the living thing and may even destroy all or part of it.<sup>37</sup> To distinguish between developments and corruptions, Newman has devised a list of characteristics proper to faithful developments of doctrine as opposed to corruptions and false teachings. As Newman explains, “it becomes necessary in consequence to assign certain characteristics of faithful developments, which none but faithful developments have, and the presence of which serves as a test to discriminate between them and corruptions.”<sup>38</sup>

First Newman proposes to define a corruption of the faith and how to differentiate it from a development. Newman defines corruption by looking at the literal meaning of the word itself and points out that it “is the breaking up of life, preparatory to its termination,”<sup>39</sup> which “begins when life has reached its perfection, and it is the sequel, or rather the continuation, of that process towards perfection, being at the same time the reversal and undoing of what went

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<sup>37</sup> Newman, 170.

<sup>38</sup> Newman, 170.

<sup>39</sup> Newman, 170.

before.”<sup>40</sup> Corruption is a breaking down of life where the living organism loses its function, energy, and vitality. Corrupt teaching would break down the life of the Church rather than build it up and help it grow as a valid development of doctrine does. Using the analogy of the growth of living things, Newman then makes a list of seven notes of the genuine development of doctrine: 1) Preservation of Type; 2) Continuity of Principles, 3) Its Power of Assimilation, 4) Its Logical Sequence, 5) Anticipation of its Future, 6) Conservative Action upon its Past, 7) Its Chronic Vigor.<sup>41</sup>

In explaining “Preservation of Type,” Newman notes that when living things grow, “the parts and proportions of the developed form, however altered, correspond to those which belong to its rudiments.”<sup>42</sup> The same basic elements are still present but have simply been changed or altered in order to attain maturity, reach perfection and be in adult form. In the plant and animal world, there can be a “great changes in outward appearances and internal harmony” as in the case of a caterpillar to a butterfly.<sup>43</sup> Analogously, initial ideas or principles may appear greatly altered or changed from their original form. However, in reality, the same basic elements are there although it appears that there are multiple changes and alterations. The basic elemental truth, concept, or teaching the same throughout all the changes that may come <sup>44</sup> the explanation, practice, or application of that truth. There can be many different expressions of the same idea, and although the expressions may differ in appearance, the idea remains constant.<sup>[56]</sup> In contrast,

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<sup>40</sup> Newman, 171.

<sup>41</sup> Newman, 171-206.

<sup>42</sup> Newman, 171.

<sup>43</sup> Newman, 171.

a corruption consists in a change in the basic idea or notion upon which a system is based. Newman comments here that the refusal to note the changes in doctrine can itself be a form of corruption<sup>45</sup>. Here, Newman gives Jesus Himself as an example, noting that he often rebuked the Pharisees for this very action. They followed the letter of the law, but not the spirit of the law. They were obedient to all the ordinances of the<sup>46</sup> did not follow the workings of the Spirit in their worship of God. Therefore, they rejected Jesus' teachings because these teachings appeared to be different. Jesus came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. However, the Pharisees rejected Jesus' teachings because the changes he brought changed the appearances of the teachings even though the teaching was constant. Newman even goes so far to say that "The Gospel is the development of the Law"<sup>47</sup>. In summary, Newman says that to determine a genuine development of doctrine by preservation of type, one must remember that<sup>48</sup> In summary, Newman says that to determine a genuine development of doctrine by preservation of type, one must remember that:

An idea then does not always bear about it the same external image; this circumstance, however, has no force to weaken the argument for its substantial identity, as drawn from its external sameness, when such sameness remains. On the contrary, for that very reason, *unity of type* becomes so much the surer guarantee of the healthiness and soundness of developments, when it is persistently preserved in spite of their number or importance.<sup>49</sup>

The second note that Newman holds as an indication of an authentic doctrinal development is "Continuity of Principles." Here, Newman explains that principles are more constant because they are the ideas or foundation upon which doctrines are built. He argues that

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<sup>45</sup> Newman, 176.

<sup>46</sup> Newman, 177.

<sup>47</sup> Newman, 177.

<sup>48</sup> Newman, 177.

<sup>49</sup> Newman, 178.

“Principles are abstract and general, doctrines relate to facts,” so therefore, “doctrines grow and are enlarged, principles are permanent.”<sup>50</sup> The principles remain constant while the doctrines develop in various ways according to those principles.<sup>51</sup> For a development of doctrine to be an authentic development and not a corruption, it “must retain both the doctrine and the principle with which it started.”<sup>52</sup> A doctrine without its corresponding principle is lifeless, and is therefore, a corruption.<sup>53</sup> Newman explains that “the destruction of the special laws or principles of a development is its corruption.”<sup>54</sup> In summary, Newman asserts, “Thus the *continuity or the alteration of the principles* on which an idea has developed is a second mark of discrimination between a true development and a corruption.”<sup>55</sup>

The third test of a faithful development of doctrine is the “Power of Assimilation.” Here Newman explains that when living things grow, they take in or assimilate certain substances as nourishment. When a substance is absorbed into a living thing, it becomes a part of the unified whole, it becomes one with it. Newman explains that “two things cannot become one, except there be a power of assimilation in one or the other.”<sup>56</sup> In an authentic development of doctrine, “A living idea becomes many, yet remains one.”<sup>57</sup> If the development of a doctrine does not include a process of incorporation, then it is a corruption.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Newman, 178.

<sup>51</sup> Newman, 180.

<sup>52</sup> Newman, 181.

<sup>53</sup> Newman, 181.

<sup>54</sup> Newman, 185.

<sup>55</sup> Newman, 185.

<sup>56</sup> Newman, 185.

<sup>57</sup> Newman, 186.

<sup>58</sup> Newman, 186-187.

The fourth note of genuine doctrinal development is what Newman refers to as “Logical Sequence.” He begins by describing logic as “the organization of thought, and, as being such, is a security for the faithfulness of intellectual developments; and the necessity of using it is undeniable as far as this, that is rules must not be transgressed.”<sup>59</sup> Newman acknowledges that sometimes the logical development of truths of the Faith can appear to be indications of rationalism, which is “the exercise of reason instead of faith in matters of faith.”<sup>60</sup> However, he points out the use of reason and logic does not necessarily exclude faith: “One does not see how it can be faith to adopt the premises, and unbelief to accept the conclusion.”<sup>61</sup> If one is going to accept the original basic truth in faith, then it would also be an act of faith to accept the logical conclusion that results from the development and growth of the basic doctrine.

The fifth note is that of “Anticipation of its Future.” Newman summarizes his arguments thus far:

Since, when an idea is living, that is, influential and effective, it is sure to develop according to its own nature, and the tendencies, which are carried out on the long run, may under favorable circumstances show themselves early as well as late, and logic is the same in all ages, instances of a development which is to come, though vague and isolated, may occur from the very first, though a lapse of time be necessary to bring them to perfection.<sup>62</sup>

Newman comments that throughout the ages, “here and there definite specimens of advanced teaching should very early occur, which in the historical course are not found till a late day.”<sup>63</sup>

The seed and roots of the development were there early on but were not found or discovered until much later. He writes, “The fact, then, of such early or recurring intimations of tendencies

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<sup>59</sup> Newman, 189.

<sup>60</sup> Newman, 191.

<sup>61</sup> Newman, 191.

<sup>62</sup> Newman, 195.

<sup>63</sup> Newman, 196.

which afterwards are fully realized, is a sort of evidence that those later and more systematic fulfillments are only in accordance with the original idea.”<sup>64</sup> In summary, “Another evidence, then, of the faithfulness of an ultimate development is its *definite anticipation* at an early period in the history of the idea to which it belongs.”<sup>65</sup> This is why we can look back and find evidence in the early centuries of the Church for the doctrinal developments of today. Finding proof for the modern developments by looking for the seeds of truth in early centuries is a normal and natural part of doctrinal development.

The sixth note is the “Conservative Action Upon its Past.” While “a corruption is a development in that very stage in which it ceases to illustrate, and begins to disturb, the acquisitions gained in its previous history,”<sup>66</sup> a genuine development changes naturally in a systematic cycle of growth. It is a continuous process and “such a change consists in addition and increase chiefly, not in destruction.”<sup>67</sup> One is brought to deeper insight into truth, “not by losing what one had, but by gaining what one had not.”<sup>68</sup> It is imperative to consider and include what has gone before. On the other hand, tearing down or reconsidering what has gone before would lead to corruption, not authentic development. Newman reiterates the following: “A developed doctrine which reverses the course of development which has preceded it, is not true development but a corruption.”<sup>69</sup> The sixth test is a conservation of the truth, “a *tendency conservative* of what has gone before it.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Newman, 196.

<sup>65</sup> Newman, 199.

<sup>66</sup> Newman, 199.

<sup>67</sup> Newman, 200.

<sup>68</sup> Newman, 201.

<sup>69</sup> Newman, 202.

<sup>70</sup> Newman, 203.

The seventh and final note of authentic doctrinal development is that of “Chronic Vigour.” A corruption is the end of a path, a dissolution and a kind of death to the living doctrine, a loss of dynamism and life in the teaching. In contrast, “while ideas live in men’s minds, they are ever enlarging into fuller development...and thus *duration* is another test of a faithful development.”<sup>71</sup> Newman explains, “Thus, while a corruption is distinguished from decay by its energetic action, it is distinguished from a development by its *transitory character*.”<sup>72</sup> There must be consistency and faithfulness to the truth throughout the development of an idea. Newman explains the following:

The point to be ascertained is the unity and identity of the idea with itself through all stages of its development from first to last, and these are seven tokens that it may rightly be accounted one and the same all along. To guarantee its own substantial unity, it must be seen to be one in type, one in its system of principles, one in its unity power towards externals, one in its logical consecutiveness, one in the witness of its early phases to its later, one in the protection which its later extend to its earlier, and one in its union of vigor with continuance, that is, in its tenacity.<sup>73</sup>

Newman addresses a few topics in his exposition, and for our purposes, we will examine what he says about the doctrinal developments surrounding the Sacrament of Penance. In order to illustrate the fourth note of authentic doctrinal development, Newman uses the example of the sacrament of Penance. Newman points out the fourth note of authentic doctrinal development is that of logical sequence and he proceeds to “give instances of one doctrine leading to another; so that, if the former be admitted, the latter can hardly be denied, and the latter can hardly be called a corruption without taking exception to the former.”<sup>74</sup> He discusses the development of doctrine which came in the early Church when the issue arose of what to do about sin after Baptism.

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<sup>71</sup> Newman, 203.

<sup>72</sup> Newman, 205.

<sup>73</sup> Newman, 206.

<sup>74</sup> Newman, 383.



Newman explains that the early Church understood that the sacrament of Baptism forgave all sin and should only be given once. Therefore, “the question immediately followed, how, since there was but ‘one Baptism for the remission of sins,’ the guilt of such sin was to be removed as was incurred after its administration.”<sup>75</sup> He explains that “By the end of the third century as many as four degrees of penance were appointed, through which offenders had to pass in order to a reconciliation.”<sup>76</sup> The early Christians considered that sins “might be absolutely remitted at the discretion of the church, as soon as true repentance was discovered.”<sup>77</sup> Newman concludes that “It cannot be doubted that the Fathers considered penance as not a mere expression of contrition, but as an act done directly toward God.”<sup>78</sup>

After examining Newman’s understanding of the development of doctrine, we will now analyze the documents of the early Church on the sacrament of Penance. According to Newman’s understanding, the truths of the Faith are hidden from the beginning as a buried and fruitful seed. These doctrines develop over time as part of a natural process of growth and maturation of an idea. The seed of the truth does not change in its very nature and essence but changes naturally as it grows according to the historical needs of the time. All developments of doctrine are united and connected to one another as portions of the whole Deposit of Faith. Lastly, all developments of doctrine are according to God’s plan and part of what Newman calls the “Divine system.”<sup>79</sup> With these principles in mind, we will examine the references to the

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<sup>75</sup> Newman, 384.

<sup>76</sup> Newman, 385.

<sup>77</sup> Newman, 387.

<sup>78</sup> Newman, 387.

<sup>79</sup> Newman, 155.

sacrament of Penance in the writings of the Fathers of the Church to determine if they give evidence of an authentic development of doctrine throughout the centuries of the early Church.

## Chapter 2

### Penance in the Post-Apostolic Age

The Post-Apostolic age begins at the end of the New Testament era after the deaths of the twelve apostles at the end of the first century and extends through the second century. The writings of this period came from all parts of the Roman Empire and reflect the content and literary style of the New Testament.<sup>80</sup> References to the sacrament of Penance are made in *The Didache*, the *Epistle of Saint Ignatius of Antioch to the Philadelphians*, the *Letter of Barnabas*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*. All these writings make mention of penitential practices for those who sin after baptism and for the need to be reconciled with the Church community.<sup>81</sup> These penitential practices become sacramental in nature when the bishop is involved.

#### The Didache

The *Didache*, or *The Teaching of the Lord for the Nations Through the Twelve Apostles*, is the earliest Christian document that could be categorized as a church order.<sup>82</sup> This genre of writings is typically a collection of rules, instructions, and decrees regarding the liturgy and other Christian practices.<sup>83</sup> The *Didache* delineates liturgical and disciplinary norms for the members of the early church. While there is much debate among scholars about when the *Didache* was written, most scholars date it between 50-150 AD.<sup>84</sup> It is considered to be a prime

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<sup>80</sup> Joseph A. Favazza, *The Order of Penitents: Historical Roots and Pastoral Future* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 81.

<sup>81</sup> Favazza, 81-82.

<sup>82</sup> Favazza, 86.

<sup>83</sup> Lawrence J. Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church: an Anthology of Historical Sources* Vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 193.

<sup>84</sup> Kenneth J. Howell, *Clement of Rome & the Didache: A New Translation and Theological Commentary* (Zanesville, OH: CHResources, 2012), 65.

example of the apostolic tradition and holds a valuable place as the intermediate document between the New Testament and the apostolic fathers.<sup>85</sup>

The *Didache* delineates two ways, the way of life and the way of death.<sup>86</sup> First, the *Didache* outlines guidelines, teachings, and commandments for how to follow God's law and thus the "way of life."<sup>87</sup> The first section is a manual of Christian conduct with a catalogue of reprimands and directives for what one should or should not do. This section ends with the all-encompassing directive that "Thou shalt hate all hypocrisy, and everything that is not pleasing to the Lord. Thou shalt not forsake the commandments of the Lord, but thou shalt keep what thou didst receive."<sup>88</sup> If one does fail in following the Lord's commandments or in any one of the directives listed in the "way of life," then the *Didache* ends this section by stating that "In the congregation thou shalt confess thy transgressions, and thou shalt not betake thyself to prayer with an evil conscience."<sup>89</sup> The section ends by stating that "This is the way of life."<sup>90</sup>

The *Didache* again mentions the confession of sins in its decrees about Sunday worship, stating that "On the Lord's Day, come together, break bread and hold Eucharist, after confessing your transgressions that your offering may be pure."<sup>91</sup> Here, the implication is that the confession of sins would take place on a regular basis in order to be ready for the Eucharistic celebration on Sundays. There is also an emphasis on the confession of sins needing to be done so that one is pure and ready to receive the Eucharistic Lord. Father Joseph Favazza notes that "less

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<sup>85</sup> Howell, 57-58.

<sup>86</sup> Howell, 137.

<sup>87</sup> Howell, 143.

<sup>88</sup> Kirsopp Lake, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers. Vol. 1* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912. Reprint, 1975), 317.

<sup>89</sup> Lake, 317.

<sup>90</sup> Lake, 317.

<sup>91</sup> Lake, 331.

equivocally than other contemporary works, the *Didache* calls for confession of sin when the Eucharistic assembly is gathered.”<sup>92</sup> This confession of sin stems from a desire to have a true conversion of heart that will help one to celebrate the Eucharistic liturgy more worthily but will also go beyond the liturgy to reach all aspects of life in following the demands of the gospel teachings.<sup>93</sup> The *Didache* makes clear that to follow the “way of life,” one must confess one’s sin.

It is worth noting that the “way of life” ends with the instruction to confess one’s sins when one fails. The *Didache* is acknowledging that we will fail to always follow the Lord’s commands, but failure is not the end. One must simply confess one’s sins to remain on the path of life.

### **Saint Ignatius of Antioch**

The seven letters of Saint Ignatius of Antioch were written in the beginning of the second century while Ignatius was on his way from Antioch to Rome to face his execution.<sup>94</sup> Throughout his seven letters, Ignatius emphasizes the unity of the church and shows a great concern for those who are following the heresy of the Docetists and Judaizers.<sup>95</sup> He encourages his readers to once again submit to the bishops who are the legitimate church authority and are central to the unity of the church.<sup>96</sup> The letter to the Church of Philadelphia was one of three letters written while Ignatius was on the second leg of his journey and staying at Alexandria

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<sup>92</sup> Favazza, 87.

<sup>93</sup> Favazza, 88.

<sup>94</sup> J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973), 55.

<sup>95</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, “The Letters of Ignatius of Antioch: Philadelphians,” 2:1, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Robert M. Grant, ed. Jack N. Sparks (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1978), 74.

<sup>96</sup> Favazza, 85.

Troas before crossing the sea for Rome.<sup>97</sup> Ignatius had travelled through Philadelphia at a previous stage in his journey, and therefore had met the Christian community there.

The letter to the Church of Philadelphia is a short letter in which Ignatius gives advice to the Philadelphians, admonishing them to be “children of the light of truth.”<sup>98</sup> In this *Epistle of Saint Ignatius of Antioch to the Philadelphians*, written around 110 A.D.,<sup>99</sup> Ignatius gives many mandates to follow so that the Philadelphians are not deceived and led astray into heresy and schism. The state of being in communion with the bishop and the presbyters of the Church is one that is especially important to Ignatius, which is highlighted in the opening of his letter when he refers to the Christians of Philadelphia as “Christians at one with the bishop and the presbyters and deacons who have been appointed by the intention of Jesus Christ, who established them, in accordance with his own will, in security by his Holy Spirit.”<sup>100</sup> When warning them against division and schism, Ignatius emphasizes the unity with the bishop that is attained through repentance and forgiveness.<sup>101</sup> He states, “For as many as belong to God and Jesus Christ, these are with the bishop. And as many as repent and come to the unity of the church, these also will belong to God so that they may be living in accordance with Jesus Christ.”<sup>102</sup> Those who are true followers of God, are in communion with the bishop. To achieve this communion, one must repent and enter into “the unity of the Church” so that they may “belong to God.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Favazza, 85.

<sup>98</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, 2:1, 104.

<sup>99</sup> Favazza, 85.

<sup>100</sup> Ignatius of Antioch., 1:1, 104.

<sup>101</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, 3, 105.

<sup>102</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, 3:2, 105.

<sup>103</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, 3:2, 105.

Ignatius makes the admonition that “God does not dwell where there is division and wrath,”<sup>104</sup> and he goes on to instruct that the remedy for such division is to repent and ask forgiveness for one's offenses: “The Lord forgives all who repent, if they repent and turn toward the unity of God and the council of the bishop.”<sup>105</sup> Favazza asserts that “there is no direct mention of any confession practice in any of the letters, certainly not within a liturgical context.”<sup>106</sup> Instead, Favazza maintains that Ignatius is affirming the scriptural practice of “an indirect coercive penance of isolation” through a shunning of the heretics who have disrupted the unity of the church.<sup>107</sup> This isolation will preserve the church from the corruption of heresy, but hopefully, it will also prompt the sinner to have a conversion of heart.<sup>108</sup>

While it is true that, as Favazza states, there is no direct mention of a practice of confession in the letter to the Philadelphians, it seems reasonable to ask if the verbal confession or acknowledgement of wrongdoing is somehow implied. In order for one to repent to “the council of the bishop,” would it not be necessary to speak verbally of one's sins? One cannot take up council with the bishop after a period of shunning and ask for repentance if one does not first verbally state one's wrongdoing and then verbally ask for repentance. This is not a matter of a private reconciliation with God alone. Ignatius holds that repentance in accordance with “the unity of God,” is primary, since it is stated first, but communion with the bishop is also necessary since it immediately follows that of unity with God.<sup>109</sup> It seems reasonable to suggest that this

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<sup>104</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, 8:1, 106.

<sup>105</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, 8:1, 106.

<sup>106</sup> Favazza, 85.

<sup>107</sup> Favazza, 85-86.

<sup>108</sup> Favazza, 86.

<sup>109</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, 8:1, 106.

communion or unity with the bishop is maintained through repentance and the forgiveness of sins, which is made in verbal council with the bishop.

### **Letter of Barnabas**

The *Letter of Barnabas*, which scholars argue is “neither a letter nor the product of Barnabas, the good friend of Paul,”<sup>110</sup> is actually a theological treatise with an unknown author. The treatise was written sometime between the years 70-150 A.D.<sup>111</sup> It is not clear where it was written although it does have many Alexandrian ideas,<sup>112</sup> especially regarding views against radical Judaizers.<sup>113</sup> The *Letter of Barnabas* was held in high esteem in Alexandria and Saint Clement, who lived in Alexandria from 180-203 A.D., referred to it as “Scripture.”<sup>114</sup> This has led some scholars to believe that the *Letter of Barnabas* was written in Alexandria as well as widely received there.<sup>115</sup> The *Letter* seems to share the same source material with the *Didache* known as the “Two Ways,” and it is therefore possible that both the *Didache* and the *Letter of Barnabas* were written in the same place, namely Alexandria, Syria, or Palestine.<sup>116</sup>

Much like the *Didache*, the *Letter of Barnabas* describes the way of a follower of Christ to be the way of light as opposed to that of darkness, and also much like the *Didache*, it includes a list of commands or precepts that must be followed in order to walk in the way of light and not

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<sup>110</sup> Johnson, 107.

<sup>111</sup> Johnson, 107.

<sup>112</sup> Lake, 337.

<sup>113</sup> Favazza, 90.

<sup>114</sup> Jack N. Sparks, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1978), 263.

<sup>115</sup> J.B. Lightfoot, “The Epistle of Barnabas,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. J.R. Harmer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973), 134.

<sup>116</sup> Favazza, 90.



be led astray into darkness.<sup>117</sup> The letter begins with a description of the kind of fasting and sacrifice that the Lord requires.<sup>118</sup> The Lord requires fasting from sin and wickedness.<sup>119</sup> In order for us to be a new creation, a temple for the Lord, we must obtain forgiveness of our sins, so that God may dwell within us.<sup>120</sup> Chapter 19 of the letter lists a lengthy sequence of commands and precepts. The letter begins this list of commands by stating, “This then is the way of light, if anyone desiring to travel on the way to his appointed place would be zealous in his works. The knowledge then which is given to us whereby we may walk therein is as follows.”<sup>121</sup> Indeed, what follows is a long list of precepts and commands instructing the Christian to walk in the way of the Lord. At the end of this long list are the following commands: “Thou shalt not make a schism, but thou shalt pacify them that contend by bringing them together. Thou shalt confess thy sins. Thou shalt not betake thyself to prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of light.”<sup>122</sup> Like Ignatius of Antioch in his letter to the Philadelphians, the Letter of Barnabas makes a point to warn against division and schism and follows this warning with the command to confess one’s sins. This confession of sins will enable the Christian to avoid division and will bring them back to unity with the Church. The precept also states that one should not pray with an evil conscience.<sup>123</sup> This precept follows the mandate that states that the Christian should confess his sins, thus implying that the remedy for an evil conscience is the confession of one’s sins.

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<sup>117</sup> Lightfoot, 153-155.

<sup>118</sup> Lightfoot, “The Epistle of Barnabas” 2, 138.

<sup>119</sup> Lightfoot, “The Epistle of Barnabas” 3, 138-139.

<sup>120</sup> Lightfoot, “The Epistle of Barnabas” 16, 153.

<sup>121</sup> Lightfoot, “The Epistle of Barnabas” 19, 153-153.

<sup>122</sup> Lightfoot, “The Epistle of Barnabas” 19, 155.

<sup>123</sup> Lightfoot, “The Epistle of Barnabas” 19, 155.

The Letter ends the list of commands with the simple statement that “This is the way of light.”<sup>124</sup> In order to walk in the way of light, one must be in union with the Church and avoid all division, and in order to be in union with the Church, one must repent and confess one’s sins, thus healing an evil conscience and the wound of sin on the soul. The ending of the Letter of Barnabas is similar to the ending of the Didache. It is not clear which document came first and if one writer used the other document as a reference or if both writers borrowed from a common source.<sup>125</sup> What is clear is that the early Christian community considered confession of sins to be a necessary action when the follower of Christ has fallen away from the conduct consistent with Christian behavior.

### **The Shepherd of Hermas**

Written in the second century between 100-150 A.D., *The Shepherd of Hermas* is a document containing visions, commands (mandates), and parables (similitudes).<sup>126</sup> The author and hero of the book is Hermas, who lived in Rome and may have been the same Hermas who is greeted by Paul in chapter 16 of the letter to the Romans,<sup>127</sup> or he may have been the brother of Pope Pius I.<sup>128</sup> In the book, Hermas describes visions he received during prayer. In these visions, he is visited by the Shepherd, the divine teacher who passes on moral lessons for the instruction of the Church.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Lightfoot, “The Epistle of Barnabas” 19, 155.

<sup>125</sup> Lake, 306.

<sup>126</sup> Sparks, 156.

<sup>127</sup> Lightfoot, 161.

<sup>128</sup> Lightfoot, 161.

<sup>129</sup> Lightfoot, 159.

This work thoroughly addresses the problem of sin after Baptism and focuses on penance, and as Favazza says, “There is no document more significant for the study of penitential practices in the second-century Church and none more controversial than the *Shepherd of Hermas*.”<sup>130</sup> Due to its figurative, allegorical, and apocalyptic style, the *Shepherd of Hermas* has been subject to different interpretations and there are various approaches that have been undertaken to explain what it proclaims about repentance and the forgiveness of sins after Baptism.<sup>131</sup> It is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore and analyze the various approaches that have been used over the years to explain the teachings regarding Penance that are contained within the *Shepherd of Hermas*. This thesis will be limited to a basic reading of the text where it is evident that the work is affirming the possibility of the forgiveness of post-baptismal sin.

Unlike the *Didache*, which focuses on Penance in relation to the sacrament of the Eucharist, the *Shepherd of Hermas* speaks of Penance in relation to Baptism. The *Shepherd* describes Baptism as the way through which one enters the Church, and penance is the way through which one reenters the Church after repenting for one’s sins. This work makes it clear that there is a possibility of repentance and conversion for those who have sinned after Baptism.<sup>132</sup> This is evident during the mandates where the shepherd, “the angel of repentance,”<sup>133</sup> tells Hermas that “being full of compassion, the Lord had mercy on what he had made and established this repentance.”<sup>134</sup> The angel then goes on to explain that “after that great

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<sup>130</sup> Favazza, 96.

<sup>131</sup> Favazza, 96-103.

<sup>132</sup> Favazza, 96.

<sup>133</sup> *Shepherd of Hermas*, “The Shepherd of Hermas,” Vis V, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Graydon F. Snyder, ed. Jack N. Sparks (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1978), 182.

<sup>134</sup> *Shepherd of Hermas*, Man IV-3, 187.

and holy calling, if anyone sins who has been tempted by the devil, he has one repentance.”<sup>135</sup>

The understanding is that if a person sins after the solemn calling of Baptism, this person may repent, but this repentance should be only once.

Throughout the entire work, there is an acknowledgement of the need for a way to gain repentance and the forgiveness of one’s sins after Baptism, but, as was stated above, it is thought that this could only happen once. Favazza explains that “What is more ‘new’ about the revelation contained in the *Shepherd of Hermas* is not the possibility of penance as much as the teaching that penance can only be undertaken one time.”<sup>136</sup> Favazza inquires after the influence for such a teaching and postulates that it arises both from eschatological and pastoral concerns.<sup>137</sup> Every human being has a limited amount of time in this world and there is simply not enough time to repeatedly complete the hard work of doing penance. According to the Shepherd, the need to repeatedly perform acts of penance indicates an unrepentant heart because if there was true repentance and conversion, then once is enough.<sup>138</sup> Favazza also points out that the author makes a connection between repentance and Baptism.<sup>139</sup> Both Baptism and repentance take away sin and lead a person to a new life in Christ, and therefore, they should both be given only once.<sup>140</sup>

Those who are forgiven and “Those of them that have repented have become good” because “the repentance of sinners means life, but not to repent means death.”<sup>141</sup> The Shepherd

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<sup>135</sup> Shepherd of Hermas, Man IV-3, 188.

<sup>136</sup> Favazza, 105.

<sup>137</sup> Favazza, 107.

<sup>138</sup> Favazza, 106.

<sup>139</sup> Favazza, 106.

<sup>140</sup> Favazza, 106.

<sup>141</sup> Shepherd of Hermas, Par VIII-6, 228.

points out that repentance is needed to be saved.<sup>142</sup> While the author states that penance for sins can only be done once after Baptism, he often points out the need for it. In order for a baptized Christian to receive forgiveness, to be saved and have life, he must be forgiven through penance. This emphasis that penance can only be done once to obtain forgiveness of sins committed after Baptism puts penance on a similar level with Baptism, thus indicating the sacramental nature of Penance. Through Penance, just as through Baptism, one receives life and is saved. Penance is also something so important that it cannot be simply received abstractly and arbitrarily but is something concrete, that is done “only one time,”<sup>143</sup> similarly to Baptism.

### **Development of Doctrine in the Post-Apostolic Age**

The command to confess one’s sins is common to these texts though there is little directive offered in terms of the form in which the practice of confession is to take place.\*

Throughout these documents of the post-apostolic age, we can see the early development of the doctrine of the sacrament of Penance according to Newman’s understanding. Most evident throughout the writings are three specific principles pertaining to Newman’s notes on the authentic development of doctrine. As stated above, Newman notes that the truths of the faith are hidden from the beginning as a fruitful seed that will grow and change over time. The seed of truth we see in the *Didache*, the *Letter of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* is the need to confess one’s sins as part of a true conversion of heart. Newman also notes that all developments of doctrine are united and connected to one another as portions of the whole Deposit of Faith. In the *Didache*, the need to confess one’s sins is integrally connected to a worthy reception and celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy, thus connecting the sacrament of Penance with the

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<sup>142</sup> Shepherd of Hermas, Par IX-26, 252.

<sup>143</sup> Shepherd of Hermas, Man IV-3, 188.

sacrament of the Eucharist. This same principle applies to the letter to the Philadelphians, where Ignatius speaks of penance within the context of preserving the unity of the Church from heresy and recognizing the legitimate authority of the Church that has been established by Christ.

Lastly, both the letter to the Philadelphians and the *Letter of Barnabas* are examples of Newman's principle regarding an authentic development of doctrine when the seed of truth has grown to meet the historical needs of the time. Throughout the letter to the Philadelphians, the only mention of penance is in relation to reconciling with the bishop after causing division through heresy. Similarly, the *Letter of Barnabas* also mentions penance in relation to reconciliation after causing division through heresy, but here the emphasis is on reconciliation with God. The emergence of heresy in the first centuries of the Church gave rise to a need for a deeper understanding of what it means to do penance for sin and thus be reconciled with God and the Church.

## Chapter 3

### Penance in the Third Century

At the end of the second century and beginning of the third century there was much discussion and debate about the problem of those who had committed mortal sin after Baptism, especially Christians who had fallen prey to heresy or apostasy. Easton refers to this as “the most thorny practical question that perplexed contemporary Christians, the problem of mortal sin after baptism.”<sup>144</sup> While it is clear from the writings examined in the previous chapter that the church of the first century upheld the need to confess one’s sins as part of a true conversion of heart and recognized the need for the sinner to be reconciled with the church, it seemed to be a common view that serious sins could not be absolved, “so that the sinners were permanently excommunicated and without hope of restoration.”<sup>145</sup> As was previously noted, the author of the *Shepherd of Hermas* did affirm the forgiveness of post-baptismal sin, but he held that this could occur only once. Even this limited allowance was opposed by some during the second century, which gave rise to “the most vigorous religious movement of the second century—Montanism—[which] took as its watchword, ‘No second remission!’”<sup>146</sup> It was this rigorism and heretical idea to which Tertullian himself fell prey. He who wrote an entire work on Penance and emphasized the need for repentance, eventually left the Church and became a Montanist. In speaking of this great theologian, Pope Benedict says, “This great moral and intellectual personality, this man who made such a great contribution to Christian thought, makes me think deeply. One sees that in the end he lacked the simplicity, the humility, to integrate himself with the Church, to accept

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<sup>144</sup> Burton Scott Easton, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934), 22.

<sup>145</sup> Easton, 22.

<sup>146</sup> Easton, 22.

his weaknesses, to be forbearing with others and himself. When one only sees his thought in all its greatness, in the end, it is precisely this greatness that is lost. The essential characteristic of a great theologian is the humility to remain with the Church, to accept his own and others' weaknesses, because actually only God is all holy. We, instead, always need forgiveness."<sup>147</sup> Tertullian expected and demanded heroism from all Christians in every circumstance, including brutal persecution.

### **Saint Irenaeus of Lyons**

Saint Irenaeus of Lyons is considered the first dogmatic theologian due to his work *Against the Heresies*, which he wrote in response to Gnosticism.<sup>148</sup> Saint Irenaeus was born in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, probably in Smyrna. It is proposed that Irenaeus was a disciple of Saint Polycarp in Asia Minor when he was young, was trained in Rome, and later served as a priest and bishop of Lyons in modern day France.<sup>149</sup> Throughout his life, Irenaeus was concerned with fighting against the Gnostic heresy.

In his treatise *Against the Heresies*, Saint Irenaeus explains the mistakes and errors of the Gnostics. In chapter 13, he addresses the teachings and actions of a certain Marcus.<sup>150</sup> Through his use of magic and his "craftiness," Marcus has "deceived many,"<sup>151</sup> including women: "Such things as these they prattled and practiced also in our own regions around the Rhone and

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<sup>147</sup> Benedict XVI, *The Fathers* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 2008), 49.

<sup>148</sup> Favazza, 108.

<sup>149</sup> David N. Bell, *A Cloud of Witnesses: An Introductory History of the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1989), 38.

<sup>150</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, "Against the Heresies," 13, in No. 55 of *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*, translated and annotated by Dominic J. Unger, O.F.M. Cap. with further revisions by John J. Dillon (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 55-59.

<sup>151</sup> Irenaeus, 13.1, 55.



deceived many women.”<sup>152</sup> Irenaeus then goes on to explain how some of these women returned to the truth. He states that “Some of these women who had had their consciences seared made a confession; some are even ashamed openly to do this; and others gradually withdrew themselves in silence and despaired of the life of God; some of them apostatized completely.”<sup>153</sup> Irenaeus mentions that some of these women “made a confession,” and he places these women first, thus upholding them as the examples to follow.

While it is evident that Irenaeus did not consider any particular sin to be so objectionable that it would be rendered unforgivable, Favazza argues that he does seem to have a harsh view of those who sin after baptism.<sup>154</sup> This would be consistent with the teaching of the *Shepherd of Hermas* who considered sin after baptism to be so great that repentance could occur only once. It is clear however, that Irenaeus does hold that salvation is possible for those who repent of apostasy and their sinful lives. Favazza points out that for this reason, “Irenaeus, while a rigorist in his teaching due to his vigorous attempt to defend the integrity of the faith, could be said to be more pastorally lenient in his practice.”<sup>155</sup>

It is interesting to note that Irenaeus uses the term *exomologesis* to refer to confession of sin, and every time the term is used, it is in reference to a public confession or the recognition of a public fault.<sup>156</sup> In the case of the women that Marcus deceived, the term seems to be used to indicate a set action done for the purpose of publicity. It is not a disclosive action since the community is already quite aware of the sin, but it is a public expression of contrition and

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<sup>152</sup> Irenaeus, 13.7, 58.

<sup>153</sup> Irenaeus, 13.7, 58.

<sup>154</sup> Favazza, 108-109.

<sup>155</sup> Favazza, 109.

<sup>156</sup> Favazza, 109.

conversion on the part of the penitent.<sup>157</sup> What seems to be most important for Irenaeus is the publicity of the penitential action and confession, rather than the severity or nature of the penitential action itself.

This emphasis on the public confession of sins that are already known to the community is consistent with the post-apostolic fathers' notion that repentance is indicative of a conversion of heart. The public confession of sin demonstrates to the community that one is contrite and ready to turn away from previous sin and do penance for it. What is distinct in Irenaeus' writings is the stress on the publicity of the confession. While in the post-apostolic fathers, there is no direct mention of a public practice of confession, here, in Irenaeus, the practice of a public verbal confession is quite clear. Those who did not make a confession of their sins are considered to still be separated from the life of God. The women who followed Marcus made their confession because their consciences helped them recognize that they had committed sin, and they can therefore be reconciled with God and the Church.

### ***The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus and the Didascalia Apostolorum***

Hippolytus was a bishop of the late second and early third century who was both a schismatic antipope and a martyred saint.<sup>158</sup> It is supposed that he was a disciple of Irenaeus of Lyons since his theological thought follows the same direction as that of Irenaeus.<sup>159</sup> Hippolytus was a prolific theological writer although many of his works no longer exist. The treatise entitled

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<sup>157</sup> Favazza, 110.

<sup>158</sup> Easton, 16.

<sup>159</sup> Bell, 78.

*Apostolic Tradition* is attributed to Hippolytus and, like the *Didache*, it is part of the body of writings known as the “church orders.”<sup>160</sup>

In the first part of the *Apostolic Tradition*, Hippolytus sets forth directives regarding the order of bishops. Hippolytus instructs that the presiding bishop should lay his hands on the man being ordained and recite the prayer of ordination. The prayer of ordination is set down in the treatise and reads in part, “Thou who knowest the hearts of all, grant to this thy servant, whom thou hast chosen to be bishop, to feed thy holy flock and to serve as thy high priest without blame... And by the Spirit of high-priesthood to have authority to remit sins according to thy commandment, to assign the lots according to thy precept, to loose every bond according to the authority which thou gavest to thy apostles.”<sup>161</sup> Favazza points out that for Hippolytus, there was never a question of whether reconciliation of sinners was possible since he affirms that this authority is given to the bishop at his ordination.<sup>162</sup> Although it is a brief reference, the fact that the power to “remit sins” and “loose every bond” is specified in the prayer of ordination for a bishop seems to suggest that the confession of sins was a practice in the early church that was perhaps reserved to the bishops as successors of the apostles.

A third important document classified as one of the church orders is the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. The *Didascalia* was written in the third century, and Connolly argues that it differs from most other documents of this type since it deals more with pastoral theology rather than ecclesiastical rules and laws.<sup>163</sup> The author is concerned with personal conduct and ecclesiastical

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<sup>160</sup> Johnson, 193.

<sup>161</sup> Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, 3, trans. Burton Scott Easton (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934), 34.

<sup>162</sup> Favazza, 177.

<sup>163</sup> Hugh R. Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum: The Syriac Version Translated and Accompanied by the Verona Latin Fragments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), xxvi-xxvii.

discipline as it affects daily life in the community.<sup>164</sup> Chapters six and seven of the *Didascalia* contain the author's teaching on repentance and forgiveness. While the *Didascalia* stresses the seriousness of sin committed after baptism, it is also very pastoral in its approach by encouraging bishops to show compassion and mercy towards sinners.<sup>165</sup> The *Didascalia* states, "Do thou therefore, O bishop, thus judge: first of all strictly; and afterwards receive (the sinner) with mercy and compassion, when he promises to repent."<sup>166</sup> The author instructs the bishops to call in the sinner for an examination to determine whether he is truly repentant. If the sinner is repentant, then the bishop should assign him a few weeks of fasting apart from the community. The time of fasting should be proportionate to the offense, and when the time of fasting and penance is completed, the sinner should be received back into the Church with mercy and rejoicing.<sup>167</sup>

The author of the *Didascalia* encourages bishops to live a life beyond reproach in order to keep those who have not sinned away from sin, and to be forgiving and compassionate to those who have sinned so they will repent and receive forgiveness from the bishop.<sup>168</sup> The author instructs, "Let the bishop therefore be careful of all, both them that have not sinned, that they may continue as they are without sin, and of them that have sinned, that they may repent, and that he may grant them forgiveness of sins."<sup>169</sup> The author makes it clear that it is the bishop who has the power from God to forgive sins when he states, "Do you therefore, O bishop, teach and rebuke, and loose by forgiveness. And know thy place, that it is that of God Almighty, and that

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<sup>164</sup> Connolly, xxvii.

<sup>165</sup> Favazza, 123.

<sup>166</sup> Connolly, 43.

<sup>167</sup> Connolly, 52-53.

<sup>168</sup> Connolly, 54-56.

<sup>169</sup> Connolly, 55.

thou hast received authority to forgive sins.”<sup>170</sup> It is clear in the *Didascalia* that the emphasis is on the role of the bishop in forgiving sins and reconciling the repentant sinner to the Church. This repentance and restoration should take place within a liturgical context as is explained, “And when he that sinned has repented and wept, receive him; and while the whole people prays over him, lay hand upon him, and suffer him henceforth to be in the Church.”<sup>171</sup> Favazza notes that while the participation of the whole community is noted, the emphasis is clearly on the role and action of the bishop.<sup>172</sup> This harkens back to the Letter to the Philadelphians by Ignatius of Antioch which stated that reconciliation with the church was made after council with the bishop. When addressing bishops, the *Didascalia* states, “For thou hast authority to forgive sins to him that offendeth; for thou hast put on the person of Christ.”<sup>173</sup>

Like the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Didascalia* makes a connection between Penance and Baptism, but it also puts it within the context of the Eucharist as in the *Didache*. The *Didascalia* directs the bishops, “And as thou baptizes a heathen and then receives him, so also lay hand upon this man, whilst all pray for him, and then bring him in and let him communicate with the Church. For the imposition of hand shall be to him in the place of baptism: for whether by the imposition of hand, or by baptism, they receive the communication of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>174</sup> Favazza notes that it is the Holy Spirit’s outpouring that paves the way for the penitent to be restored to the celebration of the Eucharist.<sup>175</sup> It should also be noted that the author of the *Didascalia* compares the liturgical practice whereby the penitent is to be restored to the Church

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<sup>170</sup> Connolly, 55.

<sup>171</sup> Connolly, 56.

<sup>172</sup> Favazza, 127.

<sup>173</sup> Connolly, 64.

<sup>174</sup> Connolly, 104.

<sup>175</sup> Favazza, 127.

to that of Baptism when one is received into the Church. This is consistent with the teaching of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which saw penance as a kind of parallel to baptism.

The author of the Didascalia compares sin to that of a sickness from which the sinner needs to be healed. The author refers to a sinner as “him that is stricken or buffeted or broken by his sins” and instructs the bishops to “bind him up and heal him and bring him into the Church.”<sup>176</sup> The bishops have this role in imitation of Christ. In speaking of Christ, the Didascalia states, “For as a wise and compassionate physician He was healing all, and especially those who were gone astray in their sins.”<sup>177</sup> The bishops are then told, “And thou also, O bishop, art made the physician of the Church: do not therefore withhold the cure whereby thou mayest heal them that are sick with sins, but by all means cure and heal, and restore them sound to the Church.”<sup>178</sup> Throughout the Didascalia, the bishops are encouraged to be merciful to repentant sinners: “Wherefore, as a compassionate physician, heal all those who sin.”<sup>179</sup>

## **Tertullian**

Tertullian was a theologian of the late second and early third centuries. He was born around the year 160 A.D. and was trained in law and rhetoric, and it was from this perspective that he approached theology.<sup>180</sup> His prolific works on prayer, morality, apologetics, church discipline, and the liturgy give us an insight into liturgical practices and moral teachings of the

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<sup>176</sup> Connolly., 62.

<sup>177</sup> Connolly, 64.

<sup>178</sup> Connolly, 64.

<sup>179</sup> Connolly, 104.

<sup>180</sup> Bell, 79.

early Church.<sup>181</sup> His strict and rigorous views on penance and church discipline led him to the heresy of Montanism because it was his view that many Christians were too lax.

Tertullian wrote his treatise *On Repentance* around the year 192 A.D.<sup>182</sup> In addition to being a theological work, this treatise also has a very practical element as Tertullian addresses the issue of Penance, who should practice it, and how to do so. Tertullian begins by describing the act of repentance, and how a Christian view of Repentance differs from that of the pagans because it is a repentance guided by reason and only for sinful deeds.<sup>183</sup> Tertullian stresses that one of the important aspects of repentance is that it helps us to limit our sinful acts.<sup>184</sup> Tertullian, therefore, makes the argument that “sin is never to be returned to after repentance.”<sup>185</sup> Here, we can see the tendency that Tertullian has to his later position of rigorism and strictness, which led him to follow the heresy of the Montanists. It should also be noted that here, during this portion of the treatise, Tertullian is talking about repentance before Baptism. He thinks that it is necessary to repent of all one’s sins before receiving the sacrament of Baptism, and we should strive not to sin again after Baptism: “We are not washed in order so that we may cease sinning, but because we have ceased.”<sup>186</sup>

In spite of this view that one should repent of all one’s sins before being bathed in the waters of Baptism and one should remain pure from sin thereafter, Tertullian does acknowledge that there are those who sin after Baptism, and he also notes that the devil can attack and tempt

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<sup>181</sup> Johnson, 112.

<sup>182</sup> Tertullian, "On Repentance," in Vol. 3 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers (Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian)*, ed. Allan Menzies and Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1885) <https://www.holybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/Ante-Nicene-Fathers-VOL-3.pdf>, 1142.

<sup>183</sup> Tertullian, 1-2, 1142-1143.

<sup>184</sup> Tertullian, 2, 1143.

<sup>185</sup> Tertullian, 5, 1148.

<sup>186</sup> Tertullian, 6, 1151.

the newly baptized: “That most stubborn foe of ours never gives his malice leisure; indeed, he is then most savage when he fully feels that a man is free from his clutches; he then flames fiercest while he is fast becoming extinguished...he is never deficient in stumbling blocks nor in temptations.”<sup>187</sup> Tertullian mentions the possibility of further repentance, but he is hesitant to do so “lest, by treating of a remedial repentance yet in reserve, we seem to be pointing to a yet further space for sinning.”<sup>188</sup> Tertullian is concerned that if there is hope of further repentance, then there will be no deterrent to avoid sinful behavior and one may take advantage of God’s mercy: “Let no one be less good because God is more so, by repeating his sin as often as he is forgiven.”<sup>189</sup> However, Tertullian notes that due to the devil’s temptations, God has provided an opportunity for sins to be forgiven even after Baptism.<sup>190</sup> It is interesting to note that in Tertullian's view, this repentance after Baptism can only be administered once. This goes back to his view that the mercy of God could be taken for granted, and one could take advantage of this “second repentance.” Once again, this is similar to the view of the author of the *Shepherd of Hermas* who feared that the need for repeated repentance after baptism was indicative of an unrepentant heart.

For the forgiveness of post-baptismal sins, Tertullian makes reference to a defined penitential practice, the confession of sins or *exomologesis*.<sup>191</sup> Tertullian himself states that God “has stationed the second repentance.”<sup>192</sup> He also notes that there is need for this second repentance or for this further healing from sin. As many of the Church Fathers, Tertullian speaks

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<sup>187</sup> Tertullian, 7, 1152.

<sup>188</sup> Tertullian, 7, 1152.

<sup>189</sup> Tertullian, 7, 1152.

<sup>190</sup> Tertullian, 7, 1153.

<sup>191</sup> Favazza, 188.

<sup>192</sup> Tertullian, 7, 1153.



of sin as a sickness that needs healing, and this healing is provided through the Church. One who has sinned should not be further harmed by shame or despair but should seek the remedy just as those who are sick must receive medicine:

If any do incur the debt of a second repentance, his spirit is not to be forthwith cut down and undermined by despair. Let it by all means be irksome to sin again, but let not to repent again be irksome: irksome to imperil one's self again, but not to be again set free. Let none be ashamed. Repeated sickness must have repeated medicine. You will show your gratitude to the Lord by not refusing what the Lord offers you. You have offended, but can still be reconciled. You have One whom you may satisfy, and Him willing.<sup>193</sup>

Tertullian continues to exhort sinners to seek healing through repentance by giving multiple examples from Scripture of God's willingness to grant pardon and forgiveness of sins.<sup>194</sup> Tertullian explains that God is a true loving Father who wants to forgive us, and he encourages sinners to come to the Father asking for forgiveness. He explains that "Confession of sins lightens...for confession is counselled by a desire to make satisfaction..."<sup>195</sup> Tertullian explains that this "second and only remaining repentance... in order that it may not be exhibited in the conscience alone....may likewise be carried out in some external act."<sup>196</sup> Tertullian then goes on to describe *exomologesis*, "whereby we confess our sins to the Lord, not indeed as if He were ignorant of them, but inasmuch as by confession satisfaction is settled, of confession repentance is born."<sup>197</sup> As in the *Didache*, Tertullian also connects Penance with the Eucharist. Favazza explains that this *exomologesis* included a time where the sinner would be excluded

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<sup>193</sup> Tertullian, 7, 1153.

<sup>194</sup> Tertullian, 8, 1153-1154.

<sup>195</sup> Tertullian, 8, 1154.

<sup>196</sup> Tertullian, 9, 1154-1155.

<sup>197</sup> Tertullian, 9, 1155.

from reception of the Eucharist, and after the time of ecclesial penance was finished, the penitent could be readmitted to communion.<sup>198</sup>

By Tertullian's description, we can surmise that exomologesis is a form of public penance.<sup>199</sup> In order for the repentance to be public, it would naturally include some sort of public confession of sins: "Bow before the feet of the presbyters and kneel to God's dear ones; to enjoin on all the brethren to be ambassadors to bear his deprecatory supplication before God."<sup>200</sup> Tertullian acknowledges the embarrassing and humiliating aspect of this public practice. In addition to the physical discomfort of wearing sackcloth and ashes,<sup>201</sup> there is also the shame of this public repentance and acknowledgement of sin.<sup>202</sup> This shame and humiliation comes because this public confession exposes what was once hidden. Here, Tertullian again appeals to the analogy of sin being similar to an illness. If a person refused to seek healing from a physician out of shame and modesty, then he could perish from the sickness, and in the same way, one must make satisfaction and repent of sin or the soul could perish.<sup>203</sup> Towards the end of his treatise, Tertullian again encourages sinners not to shy away from the practice of exomologesis because of the dire consequences that can come if one neglects to repent one's sins. He states, "If you shrink back from exomologesis, consider in your heart the hell, which exomologesis will extinguish for you."<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Favazza, 193 and 199.

<sup>199</sup> Tertullian, 9, 1155.

<sup>200</sup> Tertullian, 9, 1155.

<sup>201</sup> Tertullian, 10, 1156.

<sup>202</sup> Tertullian, 10, 1155.

<sup>203</sup> Tertullian, 10, 1155-1156.

<sup>204</sup> Tertullian, 12, 1157.

Tertullian makes it clear that this repentance must be done within the Church. He exhorts the sinners not to be ashamed because they are “among brethren and fellow servants, where there is common hope, fear, joy, grief, suffering, because there is a common Spirit from a common Lord and Father.”<sup>205</sup> He assures the sinners that the members of the Church understand and can relate to their situation.<sup>206</sup> Tertullian claims that because we are all members of the body of Christ, the body will not rejoice at the suffering of one of its members. and it will necessarily suffer with that member and work toward a remedy.<sup>207</sup> Tertullian also asserts that because the Church is the body of Christ, it is really Christ who forgives sins: “In a company of two is the church; but the church is Christ. When, then, you cast yourself at the brethren’s knees, you are handling Christ, you are entreating Christ. In like manner, when they shed tears over you, it is Christ who suffers, Christ who prays the Father for mercy.”<sup>208</sup> Finally, Tertullian concludes by summing up his premise that public confession and repentance through exomologesis is a remedy against hell, and a healing remedy for those who are spiritually sick through sin: “Therefore, since you know that after the first bulwarks of the Lord’s baptism there still remains for you, in exomologesis a second reserve of aid against hell, why do you desert your own salvation? Why are you tardy to approach what you know heals you?”<sup>209</sup> As in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, Tertullian sees a parallel between Penance and Baptism, therefore the second repentance can happen only once. Favazza notes that Tertullian argues for this on pastoral

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<sup>205</sup> Tertullian, 10, 1156.

<sup>206</sup> Tertullian, 10, 1156.

<sup>207</sup> Tertullian, 10, 1156.

<sup>208</sup> Tertullian, 10, 1156.

<sup>209</sup> Tertullian, 12, 1158.

grounds only, which indicates that this custom was not a formal ecclesial regulation.<sup>210</sup> Thus, the possibility of more than one post-baptismal repentance and reconciliation is not excluded.

### **Saint Cyprian**

Saint Cyprian was born around the year 200 A.D. and was the bishop of Carthage from 248 until his martyrdom in 258.<sup>211</sup> In the year 250, an organized persecution began under the emperor Decius, with Pope Fabian dying as the first Christian martyr known to be put to death for refusing to sacrifice to the Roman gods, which was decreed for all citizens of the Roman empire.<sup>212</sup> During the Decian persecution, Christians could go into hiding as Cyprian himself did, publicly confess their faith, and refuse to sacrifice to the Roman gods, which would result in imprisonment, torture, or martyrdom. On the other hand, Christians could also choose to submit to the decree and offer sacrifice (thus committing the sin of apostasy) or to use bribery to obtain a certificate saying that one had offered the sacrifice when this was not actually the case.<sup>213</sup> This resulted in a need for directives that specified what to do with the “lapsed” or those who had apostatized and wanted to be restored to the church when the persecution ended. \*

Saint Cyprian does not give a lengthy defense or explanation of the confession of sins for those who had denied their faith under persecution. This would be expected if he is trying to defend or rationalize this practice, especially in addressing those of his time who were against such practices. This gives evidence that the practice of confession of serious sins to the clergy was an accepted practice in the early Church.

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<sup>210</sup> Favazza, 200.

<sup>211</sup> Dallen, 37.

<sup>212</sup> Favazza, 202.

<sup>213</sup> Favazza, 203.

In his treatise *On The Lapsed*, Cyprian deals with the question of what to do with those Christians who renounced their faith in the face of persecution. Cyprian spends most of the treatise discussing the horror and evil of betraying Christ in such a manner. In the midst of his condemnation of the sin of apostasy, Cyprian does recognize that one could have fallen into this sin somewhat unwillingly. He gives the example of one who is conquered by the sufferings that came from torture.<sup>214</sup> Cyprian is willing to offer compassion and forgiveness to those who fell under the pressure of torture, and therefore, it was the “body, not the mind” that capitulated.<sup>215</sup>

Like Tertullian, Cyprian compares sin to a sickness. He speaks of those who live in their sin of apostasy without seeking reconciliation by saying, “They do not look for a patient return to health, and the true medicine which lies in making amends.”<sup>216</sup> Cyprian speaks particularly harshly against the sacrilegious sin of those who return to the sacrament of the Eucharist without having first sought repentance from the priests of the Church when he says, “In scorn and dishonor of all this, violence is offered to His Body and Blood, and they sin more now against the Lord, with hand and mouth, than when they were denying Him. Without expiating their crimes, without making confession of their sins.”<sup>217</sup> Cyprian condemns this sacrilegious action both on the part of the receivers and the priests and bishops who allowed the lapsed Christians to return to Communion without having first confessed their sin and received repentance. While Cyprian is adamant that those who have apostatized must confess their sins and make amends at

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<sup>214</sup> Cyprian, “On the Lapsed,” 10, in *The Treatises of S. Caecilius Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, and Martyr*. (London: Parker and Rivington, 1839), 161-162.

<sup>215</sup> Cyprian, “On the Lapsed” 10, 161-162.

<sup>216</sup> Cyprian, “On the Lapsed” 11, 163.

<sup>217</sup> Cyprian, “On the Lapsed” 11, 163.

the hands of the Church, he does not take the rigorist position that reconciliation and forgiveness is impossible.<sup>218</sup>

Cyprian is not stressing repentance for the sake of reconciling with the Church alone, but for reconciling with God Himself.<sup>219</sup> The minister of this forgiveness is the priest of the Church; therefore, Cyprian addresses the priests and ministers of the Church who are more lenient in giving forgiveness and reconciliation to the lapsed. Cyprian warns them to be more discerning and to ensure that the apostatized Christians have indeed fully repented for their apostasy: “But if, with untimely hast, any rash man thinks he can give remission of sins to any, or dares to rescind the precepts of the Lord, he brings not gain to the lapsed, but harm.”<sup>220</sup> This is evidence that the forgiveness of sins by the ministers of the Church was indeed happening at this time. Cyprian is not upset it is happening, just that it is happening so freely with the lapsed Christians.<sup>221</sup> He encourages the lapsed Christians to examine their consciences,<sup>222</sup> and to not be angry with the priests who refuse to give them Communion until they have made clear their repentance.<sup>223</sup> He also warns them not to rush back to Communion without having first repented; otherwise, they are committing the serious sin of sacrilege.<sup>224</sup> Reconciliation with the Church through the priests is also reconciliation with God Himself. Cyprian encourages even those who thought of denying Christ to confess these sinful thoughts even though they did not actually apostatize:

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<sup>218</sup> Favazza, 206-207.

<sup>219</sup> Cyprian, “On the Lapsed” 12, 164.

<sup>220</sup> Cyprian, “On the Lapsed” 12, 164.

<sup>221</sup> Favazza, 209.

<sup>222</sup> Cyprian, “On the Lapsed” 13, 167.

<sup>223</sup> Cyprian, “On the Lapsed” 14, 167.

<sup>224</sup> Cyprian, “On the Lapsed” 14, 168.

And further, how much better is their faith, and more wise their fear, who with no crime fastened on them of sacrifice, or of accepting a certificate, yet because they have only had thought thereof, sorrowingly and honestly own thus much before the priests of God, yield up the confession of their conscience, put from them the load of the soul, and seek out a wholesome medicine even for light and little wounds.<sup>225</sup>

According to Cyprian, not seeking confession, even for a lesser sin, simply increases one's guilt.<sup>226</sup> Cyprian goes on to explain the repentance necessary, and much of his description sounds similar to Tertullian's references about exomologesis,<sup>227</sup> namely that it involves some sort of physical aspect where the penitent fasts and is clothed in sackcloth and ashes.<sup>228</sup> Cyprian concludes his treatise by again restating that once the sinner is reconciled with the Church, he is also reconciled with God.<sup>229</sup> They are one and the same. In letters written to his fellow bishops, Cyprian reiterates many of the teachings in his treatise, namely that those who apostatized should confess their sins and do penance before receiving Communion again, those who did apostatize should indeed be given the opportunity to have their sins forgiven, and those who are in danger of death should be allowed to confess their sin.

There are eight letters written by Cyprian that mention the confession of sins.<sup>230</sup> All these letters were written in a three-year period from 250-252 A.D.<sup>231</sup> Throughout the letters, Cyprian confirms that the lapsed Christians can be received back into the Church, but he also warns the clergy against receiving lapsed Christians back into full communion before they have confessed

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<sup>225</sup> Cyprian, "On the Lapsed" 18, 171.

<sup>226</sup> Cyprian, "On the Lapsed" 18, 172.

<sup>227</sup> Favazza, 212-218.

<sup>228</sup> Cyprian, "On the Lapsed" 21, 175.

<sup>229</sup> Cyprian, "On the Lapsed" 22, 176.

<sup>230</sup> Cyprian, "Letters 15-18, 20, 30, 55, 57," in Vol. 51 of *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, trans. Sister Rose Bernard Donna, C.S.J. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1964).

<sup>231</sup> Cyprian, "Letters," 43-163.

their sins and completed a time of penance, since this could result in the sin of sacrilege.<sup>232</sup> In *Letter 15: Cyprian to the Martyrs and Confessors*, Cyprian responds to the persecuted Christians who wrote to him on behalf of some of the lapsed Christians asking if they could be received back into the Church after the persecution ended.<sup>233</sup> Cyprian responds in the affirmative, warns against being too lenient, and also gives us a glimpse into the rite that was used when the lapsed Christians confessed their sins. Like the *Didascalia*, Cyprian mentions the act of imposition of hands by the priest and bishop. Cyprian reiterates in this letter that indeed the lapsed can receive pardon and forgiveness, but they must follow the precepts and instructions of the Church in this regard.<sup>234</sup> In *Letter 16: Cyprian to the Priests and Deacons*, Cyprian admonishes the clergy under his jurisdiction of the danger and harm that is done by receiving the lapsed back to the sacrament of the Eucharist without first requiring penance. He points out that confession is required for lesser sins, yet the sin of apostasy is much greater and is being treated with too much leniency:

For, although sinners do penance for a just time for the lesser sins and, according to the order of discipline, come to confession that they may receive the right to receive Communion through the imposition of hands of the bishop and of the clergy, now in an unpropitious time with a persecution still raging, with the peace of the Church itself not yet restored, they are admitted to Communion and there is an offering in their name. And, although penance has not yet been performed, confession has not yet been made, hands have not yet been imposed upon them by bishop and clergy, the Eucharist is given to them.<sup>235</sup>

Notably, *Letter 16* specifically lists the three separate parts of the sacrament of Confession, namely, the confession of sins, the imposition of hands by a member of the clergy,

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<sup>232</sup> Cyprian, "Letters" 15.1, 44.

<sup>233</sup> Cyprian, "Letters" 15.1, 43-44.

<sup>234</sup> Cyprian, "Letters" 15.1, 44.

<sup>235</sup> Cyprian, "Letters" 16.2, 47-48.



and the penance performed. This letter makes clear that this was an accepted and common practice of reconciliation within the Church. Cyprian is not instructing the priests and deacons on how to do these components of the rite but simply mentions them as having been neglected when the lapsed are received back into full Communion with too much leniency. In *Letter 17: Cyprian to the Brethren*, Cyprian makes it clear that he is concerned that the clergy are leading the lapsed Christians into sacrilege. While acknowledging the sorrow and grief that all are feeling about the members of the Church who apostatized during the persecution,<sup>236</sup> Cyprian counsels the brethren not to act too quickly in restoring the lapsed to full communion lest the sin of sacrilege be committed. Cyprian states, “Yet I think that we ought not to rush into things, nor to act incautiously and hurriedly in anything, lest, while peace is rashly usurped, the displeasure of divine indignation be more seriously aroused.”<sup>237</sup> As in the previous letter to the clergy of Carthage, Cyprian reprimands those who have already received the lapsed back into full communion and allowed them to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist without first receiving the sacrament of penance. He makes the same argument that just as penance must be done for lesser sins, the more serious sin of apostasy must not be treated with leniency.<sup>238</sup>

In *Letter 18: Cyprian to the Priests and Deacons*, Cyprian writes a short letter making an additional note that if one of the lapsed Christians is in danger of death by illness, then he may confess his sins and be reconciled. Cyprian writes, “If they should be seized with an injury and danger of illness when our presence is not expected, [they] may make confession of their sin before whatever priest may be present.”<sup>239</sup> In *Letter 20: Cyprian to the Priests and Deacons of*

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<sup>236</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 17.1, 49.

<sup>237</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 17.1, 50.

<sup>238</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 17.2, 50.

<sup>239</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 18.1, 51.

*Rome*, Cyprian reaffirms his instruction that if anyone was close to death, then “after they had made confession and had hands imposed in penance, they should be sent to the Lord with the peace promised to them by the martyrs.”<sup>240</sup> Cyprian also corrects the gossip that has spread about him regarding his treatment of the lapsed Christians<sup>241</sup> and once again explains that the lapsed Christians should have a time of penance before being received back into full communion, that they should not rush into things too hurriedly, and that they should observe the discipline of the church.<sup>242</sup>

In *Letter 30: Priests and Deacons of Rome to Cyprian*, the clergy of the Church in Rome respond to Cyprian by acknowledging the sins committed by the lapsed and the added sin of sacrilege that can be committed if they are received too quickly back to full communion “through false mercy” whereby “new wounds may be added to the old wounds of sin so that repentance may also be snatched from the wretched for their greater downfall.”<sup>243</sup> In *Letter 17*, Cyprian referred to the sins of the lapsed Christians as “wounds” and states that “the Divine Mercy is powerful to give healing to them.”<sup>244</sup> In their response, the clergy themselves use the same analogy Cyprian used to compare sin to sickness and repentance to healing with the priests being described as doctors. Here, they are referring to the priests who lead the lapsed astray by not requiring full repentance from them before they are restored to communion when they write, “For where can the medicine of pardon appear if even the doctor himself encourages dangers when repentance has been cut off, if he only covers the wounds and does not allow the necessary

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<sup>240</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 20.3, 55.

<sup>241</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 20.1, 54.

<sup>242</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 20.2, 54-55.

<sup>243</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 30.3, 74.

<sup>244</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 17.1, 49.

antidotes to time to heal the scar? This is not to cure but, if we wish to speak the truth, to kill.”<sup>245</sup>

The clergy also agree with Cyprian about allowing the lapsed who are in danger of death to receive forgiveness even before they can be fully restored to communion by the bishop.<sup>246</sup>

In *Letter 55: Cyprian to Antonian*, Cyprian writes to a fellow bishop concerning the case of Novatian, a heretic who held a rigorist position regarding the lapsed Christians.<sup>247</sup> Cyprian assures Antonian that he remains steadfast to following the discipline of the Church and is not overly lenient in regard to the lapsed.<sup>248</sup> He even advises that those ministers who are giving Communion to the lapsed before they have formally been received back into the Church should themselves be denied Communion.<sup>249</sup> Cyprian reaffirms what he has written in previous letters to clergy and Christians of Carthage. He specifically mentions that “peace should be given to the lapsed who were sick and about to die.”<sup>250</sup> He clarifies the position of the council of bishops that reconciliation should be given to the lapsed but not rashly without time for penance and deliberation. Here, we see an example of the development of doctrine in an organic manner. Cyprian met with the bishops and the first thing they did was to look at Scripture and then apply the teachings to address the “urgency of the times” and meet the needs of the present situation.<sup>251</sup> Cyprian answers Antonian’s questions about a fellow bishop Trofimius who apostatized during the Decian persecution by offering incense to the Roman gods but was restored to lay communion with the Church due to the influence this would have in bringing back his people to

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<sup>245</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 30.3, 74.

<sup>246</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 30.8, 78.

<sup>247</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.1, 134.

<sup>248</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.3-4, 135.

<sup>249</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.4, 136.

<sup>250</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.5, 136.

<sup>251</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.6, 136-137.

the Church. Cyprian clarifies that Trofimus was not reinstated to his episcopate, but he “made satisfaction and confessed with the penance of supplication his former error.”<sup>252</sup> He clarifies once again that “If there are any who are stricken with infirmities, assistance is given to them in danger as it has been decided.”<sup>253</sup>

Cyprian also acknowledges that the motivation behind the sin must be considered when determining the seriousness of the sin and therefore the length of the time of penance. He explains that there is a difference between those who seemed to rush immediately into apostasy of their own free will, and those who struggled and fought but finally surrendered in order to save and protect their families.<sup>254</sup> He also mentions those who brought others to apostasy as opposed to those lapsed Christians who helped other Christians escape.<sup>255</sup> Cyprian asserts that it is a “lack of mercy,” “harshness,” and “inhumanity” to treat all the lapsed Christians the same and the clergy will be held accountable that they “have not cared for the wounded sheep” but instead have “given occasion to the dogs and wolves.”<sup>256</sup> He states that the secular philosophers are wrong when they say that all sins have an equal value and he tells Antonian that “we must avoid those things which do not come from the clemency of God but descend from the presumption of a too harsh philosophy.” Cyprian’s fear is that the lapsed “should fall away through despair,”<sup>257</sup> either to the pagans because they were “segregated from the Church harshly and cruelly,” or that they would join those in schism because they were “rejected by the

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<sup>252</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.11, 140.

<sup>253</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.13, 141.

<sup>254</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.13, 141.

<sup>255</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.13, 141.

<sup>256</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.14-15, 142-143.

<sup>257</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.17, 144.

Church.”<sup>258</sup> He is concerned that those in danger of death be received back into full communion “because there is no confession among the dead.”<sup>259</sup> The lapsed should be received back into full communion and have their time of penance be shortened either when in danger of death or when further persecution is imminent and they need the grace to face what lies ahead: “If the battle should come first, he will be found strengthened by us, armed for the battle; but if infirmity should press hard before the battle, he dies with the solace of peace and communion.”<sup>260</sup>

In dealing with the lapsed, Cyprian admonishes that the bishops should “encourage them also as much as we can with the aid and solace of our love and to be not so severe and pertinacious in blunting their repentance, nor, again, free and easy in rashly relaxing communication.”<sup>261</sup> He admonishes Antonian that “as bishops of God and of Christ, imitating what Christ both taught and did,” it is their role to “snatch the wounded from the jaws of his adversary” and to “save him cured for God, the Judge.”<sup>262</sup> Cyprian addresses a concern of Antonian that sinful behavior may be encouraged and the number of righteous witnesses may be diminished because of the possibility of repentance.<sup>263</sup> Cyprian responds that rather than causing the number of the faithful to diminish, the faithful will be encouraged in their fidelity.<sup>264</sup> Cyprian compares this to the sin of adultery. He points out that just because adulterers are allowed to receive penance, this does not mean that the number of virgins lessens. “For a time of penance is allowed by us even to adulterers and peace is given to them. Yet virginity does not, on that

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<sup>258</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.17, 144.

<sup>259</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.17, 144.

<sup>260</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.17, 144.

<sup>261</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.19, 145.

<sup>262</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.19, 145-146.

<sup>263</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.20, 146.

<sup>264</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.20, 146.

account, fail in the Church, nor does the glorious design of continency languish through the sins of others. The Church flourishes, crowned with so many virgins, and chastity and modesty keep the tenor of their glory; nor is the vigor of continency destroyed because penance and pardon are mitigated for adulterers.”<sup>265</sup> This example of adulterers is significant because it is an indication that there were other sins besides apostasy that could be confessed so the sinner could do penance and receive forgiveness. It should be noted that this confession must be made to the leaders of the Church because Cyprian specifically says that the adulterers are able to do penance because they are “allowed by us,” that is the clergy, the leaders of the Church, who will grant them forgiveness and peace. Just as there were those who held a rigorist position in regard to the lapsed, Cyprian points out that there were also those bishops who also felt that adulterers should be treated with severity: “And, indeed among our predecessors, some of the bishops here in our province thought that peace should not be given to adulterers, and they shut off completely the opportunity for penance in the case of adultery.”<sup>266</sup> The same is happening with regard to the lapsed: “But I wonder that some are so obstinate as to think that penance ought not to be allowed to the lapsed or as to consider that pardon ought to be denied to the penitent.”<sup>267</sup> Cyprian refers to several passages in the Scriptures where sinners are exhorted to seek repentance.<sup>268</sup> Cyprian observes that “The Lord certainly would not exhort to repentance if it were not because He promised pardon to the penitent.”<sup>269</sup> He states, “Reading, certainly, and holding this, we think that no one should be kept away from the fruit of satisfaction and from the hope of peace since

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<sup>265</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.20, 146.

<sup>266</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.21, 146.

<sup>267</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.22, 147.

<sup>268</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.22, 147.

<sup>269</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.22, 147.

we know, according to the faith of the Divine Scriptures, God Himself being the Author and Comforter, both that sinners are led to do penance and that pardon and forgiveness are not denied to the penitent.”<sup>270</sup> This is in opposition to the rigorists who are in schism and hold that penance should be done but forgiveness is not granted. These rigorists maintain that though the sinners may repent and mourn their wrongdoings, they “will die outside the Church!”<sup>271</sup>

Cyprian notes that the penance must be received from the priests and bishops of the Church, but he always maintains that it is really Christ who judges and forgives through the action of his ministers in the Church: “For we do not prejudge since the Lord will come to judge so that if He finds the repentance of the sinner full and just, then He may ratify whatever may have been decided by us here.”<sup>272</sup>

*Letter 57* was composed in the year 252 A.D. by Cyprian and the Bishops at the Council of Carthage to Pope Cornelius. They open the letter with the decisions they have made regarding the lapsed Christians and their restoration to full communion with the Church, namely that they should be required to do prolonged penance except in danger of death.<sup>273</sup> The bishops explain to the pope their reasoning for this allowance by stating that it does not seem in accordance with Christ’s mercy for “the hope of salvation be denied to those who lament and supplicate so that, when they depart from the world, they should be sent forth to the Lord without Communion and peace.”<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.27, 152.

<sup>271</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.28, 152-153.

<sup>272</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 55.18, 144.

<sup>273</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 57.1, 158.

<sup>274</sup> Cyprian, “Letters” 57.1, 158.

In addition to granting forgiveness to those in danger of death, the bishops saw a need to shorten the time of penance for other members of the lapsed as another time of persecution was approaching.<sup>275</sup> The bishops wanted these lapsed Christians to be restored to full communion with the Church so that they may receive the Eucharist and be prepared for the persecution ahead.<sup>276</sup> They believed it to be their duty as the shepherds of Christ's Church to prepare the sheep for battle, and therefore, they wanted to bring peace to the lapsed.<sup>277</sup>

## Origen

Origen was a prolific writer, preacher, philosopher, and theologian in the first half of the third century.<sup>278</sup> He was the head of the Alexandrian school for a time, founded a school in Palestine, and became known for his preaching and teaching throughout both the East and the West.<sup>279</sup> Favazza asserts that throughout his many works, Origen developed a systematic theology of Penance.<sup>280</sup> However, due to his role as a teacher and scholar, rather than a pastor, Origen can seem to have rigorist leanings regarding sin after baptism.<sup>281</sup> Origen focused on the ideal rather than the concrete. In his *Homily 2 on Leviticus*, he addresses the subject of sin, forgiveness, and penance:

But perhaps the hearers of the Church may say, generally it was better with the ancients than with us, when pardon for sinners was obtained by offering sacrifices in a diverse ritual. Among us, there is only one pardon of sins, which is given in the beginning through the grace of baptism. After this, no mercy nor any indulgence is granted to the

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<sup>275</sup> Cyprian, "Letters" 57.3, 159.

<sup>276</sup> Cyprian, "Letters" 57.3-4, 159-161.

<sup>277</sup> Cyprian, "Letters" 57.5, 161-162.

<sup>278</sup> Favazza, 146.

<sup>279</sup> Favazza, 147-148.

<sup>280</sup> Favazza, 148.

<sup>281</sup> Favazza, 148.



sinner. Certainly, it is fitting that the Christian, ‘for whom Christ died,’ have a more difficult discipline.<sup>282</sup>

Origen points out that the Jewish people needed only sacrifice animals or crops to satisfy their sins, while for us, the Son of God was killed, so therefore, no sacrifice for the remission of sins should be too much.<sup>283</sup> He says, “Lest these things not so much build up your souls for virtue as cast them down to despair, you heard how many sacrifices there were in the Law for sins. Now hear how many are the remission of sins in the gospel.”<sup>284</sup> Like Cyprian, Origen is concerned that the prospect of no forgiveness for sin could lead Christians to despair. They know it is the duty of the ministers of the Church to meet this pastoral need.

“First is the one by which we are baptized ‘for the remission of sins.’ A second remission is in the suffering of martyrdom. Third, is that which is given through alms. For the Savior says, ‘but nevertheless, give what you have and, behold, all things are clean for you.’ A fourth remission of sins is given for us through the fact that we also forgive the sins of our brothers. For thus the Lord and Savior himself says, ‘If you will forgive from the heart your brothers’ sins, your Father will also forgive you your sins. But if you will not forgive your brothers from the heart, neither will your Father forgive you.’ And thus he taught us to say in prayer, ‘forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.’ A fifth forgiveness of sins is when ‘someone will convert a sinner from the error of his way.’ For thus divine Scripture says, ‘Whoever will make a sinner turn from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.’ There is also a sixth forgiveness through the abundance of love as the Lord himself says, ‘Truly I say to you, her many sins are forgiven because she loved much.’ And the

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<sup>282</sup> Origen, “Homilies on Leviticus 1-16,” in Vol. 83 of *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, trans. Gary Wayne Barkley (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 46.

<sup>283</sup> Origen, “Homilies on Leviticus,” 47.

<sup>284</sup> Origen, “Homilies on Leviticus,” 47.

Apostle says, 'Because love will cover a multitude of sins.' And there is still a seventh remission of sins through penance, although admittedly it is difficult and toilsome, when the sinner washes 'his couch in tears' and his 'tears' become his 'bread day and night,' when he is not ashamed to make known his sin to the priest of the Lord and to seek a cure."<sup>285</sup>

To reiterate the duty of the minister to meet the needs of sinners, Origen also quotes the letter of James: "What the Apostle James said is fulfilled in this: 'But if anyone is sick, let that person call the presbyters of the Church, and they will place their hands on him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and if he is in sins, they will be forgiven him.'"<sup>286</sup>

In *Homily 10 on the book of Numbers*, Origen states, "Those who are not holy die in their sins; those who are holy do penance for their sins, feel their wounds, understand reason then, the words of the Law carefully and expressly indicate that high priests and priests not only 'take on sins' of just anyone, but of the holy ones. For one who cures his sin through the high priest is a 'holy one.'"<sup>287</sup>

### **Development of Doctrine in the Third Century**

Throughout the third century, there is an obvious development of doctrine according to Newman's principle that the seed of truth grows to meet the historical needs of the time. This was a time of persecution when the most pressing question concerned those who apostatized and wanted to be reconciled with the church. When Cyprian met with the bishops, they looked at Scripture to find the seed of truth regarding the forgiveness of sins, and then applied that truth to

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<sup>285</sup> Origen, "Homilies on Leviticus," 47.

<sup>286</sup> Origen, "Homilies on Leviticus," 48.

<sup>287</sup> Origen, "Homilies on Numbers," 10:1.8, in *Ancient Christian Texts*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, ed. Christopher A. Hall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 46.

address the urgent needs of the present situation in which they found themselves, thus concluding that it was possible for post-baptismal sin to be forgiven. Newman also notes that in an authentic development, doctrines do not remain stagnate but develop over time as part of a natural process of growth and maturation of an idea. We can see this principle in the example of Cyprian's encouragements to the bishops to give absolution to those who may be in danger of death and that the sick person may confess their sins to an available priest and not just the bishop. It is also evident in Origen's writings where he is concerned that the Christian could be led to despair if there is not opportunity for forgiveness. Both Cyprian and Origen provide a natural maturation of the idea of confessing one's sins to be reconciled with God and the Church through pastoral considerations.

Throughout the writings of Irenaeus, Hippolytus, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Tertullian, and Cyprian, the rite or practice of Penance is described in more precise terms than the writings of the previous century. Reference is made to the confession of sins, the laying on of hands by a member of the clergy, and the penance performed. The practice of Penance developed to reflect the natural growth and maturation of the same seeds of truth we saw in the writings of the second century. The practice of confession of sins reflects the truth that there is a need to confess one's sins as part of a true conversion of heart. The imposition of hands by a priest or bishop recognizes the legitimate authority of the Church that has been established by Christ. Finally, the penance performed demonstrates what it means to make restitution in order to be reconciled with God and the Church.

## Chapter 4

### Penance in the Fourth Century

After the crisis of persecution in the third century brought on a substantial development in the practice of Penance after baptism, especially in regard to the lapsed, further developments continued in the fourth century.

#### Aphrahat the Persian Sage

Little is known about the life of Aphrahat the Persian Sage, but there is some speculation that he was the head of a monastery and perhaps a bishop.<sup>288</sup> He lived during the first half of the fourth century in the Persian empire in a Syriac-speaking Christian community,<sup>289</sup> possibly located in what is now present-day Iraq.<sup>290</sup> Aphrahat wrote twenty-three homilies, or *Demonstrations*, on various aspects of the Christian life. In his writings, Aphrahat remains faithful to the Scriptures upon which he bases all his arguments and expositions.<sup>291</sup>

While the sources considered thus far have been from the North African, Roman, and Greek Christian heritage, the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat the Persian Sage, which was published between 336 and 345 A.D., gives us insight into the Syriac Church's understanding of Reconciliation and the need for confession of sins and repentance.<sup>292</sup> This text is especially important because it is not completely clear that there were any direct influences from the West on the author's theology and thought. He is not simply reproducing theological notions and

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<sup>288</sup> Benedict XVI, 153.

<sup>289</sup> Adam Lehto, introduction to *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press LLC., 2010), 5.

<sup>290</sup> Benedict XVI, 153.

<sup>291</sup> Benedict XVI, 154.

<sup>292</sup> Lehto, vii-1.

concepts from the Western Church. Rather, he is teaching the Christian faith as based on Scripture and “recognizes no source apart from scripture.”<sup>293</sup> He is not copying some invention from the West. Most of the authors we have considered so far are from the West. There is no evidence that his theological thought was directly influenced by the events and thoughts of the Western Church. In his *Demonstrations*, Aphrahat “shows no awareness (or at least no recognition) of the Council of Nicaea, which took place eleven years before he wrote the first installment of his *Demonstrations*”<sup>294</sup> “As for Western authors, no evidence of direct literary dependence exists.”<sup>295</sup> However, he may have had access to the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, which was translated from Greek into Syriac.<sup>296</sup> However, “this is not to say that Aphrahat does not share any themes and traditions of interpretations with earlier texts.”<sup>297</sup> Several scholars have suggested that Aphrahat may have been influenced by the Didache, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Justin Martyr, and the Shepherd of Hermas.<sup>298</sup> While “the literary dependence of the *Demonstrations* on any of these earlier texts cannot be proven,”<sup>299</sup> it must be affirmed that there is great value in “trying to understand the currents of thought that may, in some form, have influenced Aphrahat.”<sup>300</sup> Therefore, although he is not a Western author, it seems fitting to examine his text in the context of the same time period and thereby to more fully understand this exposition.

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<sup>293</sup> Lehto, 19.

<sup>294</sup> Lehto, 5.

<sup>295</sup> Lehto, 22.

<sup>296</sup> Lehto, 21.

<sup>297</sup> Lehto, 22.

<sup>298</sup> Lehto, 22.

<sup>299</sup> Lehto, 22.

<sup>300</sup> Lehto, 22.

While the identity of Aphrahat is not completely clear,<sup>301</sup> this author “has the distinction of being the earliest clear personality in the field of Syriac literature whose own work survives in its original language,”<sup>302</sup> thus making his work a very important historical text. The author seems to have been someone in authority for “he speaks as a master of the spiritual life,”<sup>303</sup> and due to the fact that he offers advice to other pastoral leaders, it is clear that he “saw himself as a leader among leaders.”<sup>304</sup> Throughout his *Demonstrations*, Aphrahat uses Scripture as his basis and his guide. His arguments and expositions are based on the Scriptural texts,<sup>305</sup> and therefore, “Aphrahat’s position in the Church as an authoritative interpreter of the scriptures is clear from his writings.”<sup>306</sup> The *Demonstrations* were written between the years 336-345 AD.<sup>307</sup>

*Demonstration 7* is entitled *On the Penitent*,<sup>308</sup> and it is this demonstration that gives a thorough treatment of repentance. The author begins by comparing sin to an illness and discusses repentance as a remedy applied by wise physicians.<sup>309</sup> Aphrahat situates his whole discussion within the context of a spiritual battle: “In this way, my friend, if there is anyone who labors in our struggle and his Enemy comes against him and injures him, it is appropriate to give him the remedy of repentance, as long as the regret of the wounded person is deep.”<sup>310</sup> In this battle,

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<sup>301</sup> Lehto, 4.

<sup>302</sup> Lehto, 5.

<sup>303</sup> Lehto, 5.

<sup>304</sup> Lehto, 5.

<sup>305</sup> Lehto, 7.

<sup>306</sup> Lehto, 8.

<sup>307</sup> Lehto, 1-2.

<sup>308</sup> Aphraates, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage*, trans. Adam Lehto (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press LLC., 2010), 199.

<sup>309</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.2, 201.

<sup>310</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.2, 201.

Christians have “put on the armor of Christ,”<sup>311</sup> but they cannot wear their armor if they have developed infected wounds.<sup>312</sup> Aphrahat compares the sinner to a wounded warrior who falls during battle and therefore, must make his wound known to a “wise physician” so that “when he is healed, the King will not reject him.”<sup>313</sup> This seems to indicate that someone must step in as a physician, someone must hear the sinner’s confession of sins in order to heal the sinner and restore him to Christ the King. Aphrahat goes on to emphasize that we must actually confess our sins and make them known otherwise he “is not able to be healed, since he does not wish to make known his wounds to the physician.”<sup>314</sup>

Aphrahat then goes on to address the spiritual leaders of the Church admonishing them not to withhold forgiveness from those who confess their sins: “It is also appropriate that you physicians, disciples of our Glorious Physician, not withhold medicine from the one who needs to be healed. Give the remedy of repentance to [the person] who shows you his abscess.”<sup>315</sup> Aphrahat directs the leaders to encourage sinners to confess their sins and to treat the sinners with gentleness and sensitivity by not revealing their sins to others: “Advise [the person] who is ashamed to show you his sickness that he should not hide from you. And when he shows [it] to you, do not make it known.”<sup>316</sup> Sinners should be treated with gentleness and sensitivity and not as an enemy: “Do not treat as an adversary the one among you who is struggling with wrongdoing, but rather counsel him and admonish him as a brother, for when you separate him

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<sup>311</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.7, 201.

<sup>312</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.5, 202.

<sup>313</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.3, 201.

<sup>314</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.3, 201.

<sup>315</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.4, 202.

<sup>316</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.4, 202.

from yourselves, he will be attacked by Satan.”<sup>317</sup> In this spiritual battle in which we are engaged, Aphrahat recognizes the wisdom of healing the wounded so that they are not further attacked by the enemy. We must help each other in this spiritual warfare just as warriors help their brother warriors in battle. Aphrahat laments the instances where a sinner “confesses his wrongdoing but is not given repentance,” and he admonishes the Church leaders to minister to sinners: “O steward of Christ: give repentance to your companion, and remember that your Lord did not reject those who had repented!”<sup>318</sup>

Aphrahat reiterates the importance of confessing one’s sins and making them known. He continues to compare the forgiveness of sin with the healing of a wound and explains that “If those who have been wounded do not wish to reveal their injuries, the doctors are not to blame for not healing the sick who have been injured.”<sup>319</sup> One cannot heal what one does not know needs healing. Similarly, if a sinner does not confess his sins, then the sins cannot be forgiven and the wound in his soul cannot be healed. Aphrahat repeatedly encourages the sinner to confess his sins: “I exhort you, therefore, you who have been wounded, not to be ashamed to say, ‘We have yielded in the struggle.’ Take for yourselves the priceless remedy; repent and live.”<sup>320</sup> Aphrahat then goes on to give examples from scripture of those who did not confess their sins and repent, such as Adam and Cain<sup>321</sup> and well as examples of those who did confess their sins such as David with the prophet Nathan,<sup>322</sup> and Aaron<sup>323</sup> as well as Simon Peter who repented of

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<sup>317</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.11, 206.

<sup>318</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.25, 216.

<sup>319</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.5, 202.

<sup>320</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.8, 203.

<sup>321</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.8, 203-204 and 7.16, 208-209.

<sup>322</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.8, 203 and 7.14, 207-208.

<sup>323</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.15, 208.



his denial of Christ.<sup>324</sup> He also gives the example of Zaccheus and the sinful woman, who both acknowledge their sins before Jesus and are granted forgiveness.<sup>325</sup> If even Jesus forgives those who have confessed their sins, then Aphrahat argues that the leaders of the Church must do the same and not withhold forgiveness from them. Aphrahat concludes this demonstration by saying, “Read, my friend, and learn and know and see that concerning this every person is in need to one degree or another”<sup>326</sup> because we are all sinners in need of repentance and forgiveness.

### **Saint Ambrose of Milan**

Saint Ambrose lived in the latter half of the fourth century. He was the bishop of Milan and is one of the great doctors and fathers of the Church.<sup>327</sup> Though he is probably most famously known for being the catalyst for the conversion of Saint Augustine, he was a learned theologian in his own right. During his time as bishop, Ambrose wrote and spoke against paganism and heresies in the Church, especially Arianism. As bishop, he also wrote against the Novatian heresy and clarified the Church’s teaching on Penance.<sup>328</sup>

While he was bishop, he wrote a treatise *On Penance*, which is directed against the heresy of the Novatians who declared that the Church did not have the power to forgive greater sins.<sup>329</sup> To support his argument, Ambrose, like Chrysostom, points to the passage in the Gospel of John where Jesus gives the Apostles the power to forgive sins. Ambrose goes on to state that the Novatians do Christ great injury when they “choose to reject the office entrusted to them. For

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<sup>324</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.15, 208.

<sup>325</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.23, 214.

<sup>326</sup> Aphraates, *Demonstrations* 7.27, 217.

<sup>327</sup> Johnson, 12.

<sup>328</sup> Dallen, 43.

<sup>329</sup> Johnson, 21.

inasmuch as the Lord Jesus Himself said in the Gospel, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit; whosoever sins you forgive, they are forgiven them; and whosoever sins you retain, they are retained,’ who is it that honors Him most, he who obeys His bidding or he who rejects it?’<sup>330</sup> Ambrose further reiterates this point by saying the following:

The Church holds fast its obedience on either side, by both retaining and remitting sin. Heresy is on the one side cruel, and on the other disobedient; wishes to bind what it will not loosen, and will not loosen what it has bound, whereby it condemns itself by its own sentence. For the Lord willed that the power of binding and of loosing should be alike, and sanctioned each by a similar condition. So he who has not the power to loose has not the power to bind. For as, according to the Lord’s word, he who has the power to bind has also the power to loose.<sup>331</sup>

Ambrose is pointing out that whoever does not have the authority to forgive sins, also does not have the authority to retain sins. Like Chrysostom, Ambrose recognizes that this power to forgive sins is a supernatural power that comes directly from God, and he uses this in his argument against the Novatians: “Why do you baptize if sins cannot be remitted by man? If baptism is certainly the remission of all sins, what difference does it make whether priests claim that this power is given to them in penance or at the font? In each the mystery is one.”<sup>332</sup> Ambrose is showing a connection here between the sacraments of Baptism and Penance. Sin is forgiven in both sacraments. Ambrose recognizes Penance as a sacrament because the power comes from God. It is not just a pious practice. Ambrose says, “But you say that the grace of the mysteries works in the font. What works, then, in penance? Does not the Name of God do the work?”<sup>333</sup> Ambrose is arguing that if the grace of God is at work in Baptism, why would it not also be at work in the sacrament of Penance where God’s name is also at work? In fact, for

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<sup>330</sup> Ambrose, “On Repentance” I.II.6, 723.

<sup>331</sup> Ambrose, “On Repentance” I.II.7, 723.

<sup>332</sup> Ambrose, “On Repentance” I.VIII.36, 735

<sup>333</sup> Ambrose, “On Repentance” I.VIII.37, 735.

Ambrose, the sinner can only receive heavenly rewards if he is restored to the communion of the Church: “Those who have hidden crimes should nonetheless zealously do penance out of love for Christ, for how do they here receive anything if reconciliation is not extended to them?”<sup>334</sup>

Because it is God’s will that all mankind be reconciled to him, he then necessarily establishes the means by which sinners can gain pardon from their guilt. It is because He wants man to enter into communion with Him that Christ allows the apostles and their successors to share in His divine authority to forgive sins. Ambrose indicates that this power to forgive sins comes not from man but is only made possible through God’s gratuitous gift: “But that which was impossible God made to be possible... It seemed impossible that sins should be forgive through repentance, but Christ gave this power to His apostles, which has been transmitted to the priestly office.”<sup>335</sup>

Thus, while it appears impossible that sins could be forgiven by means of penance, Christ transforms this impossibility into reality by granting the authority to forgive sins to his apostles, and from them, it was handed down to be among the functions of the priests.

### **Saint John Chrysostom**

Saint John Chrysostom lived in the latter half of the fourth century in the city of Antioch in Syria.<sup>336</sup> He was trained in rhetoric and philosophy, attempted to live a hermetical life for a time, and then was ordained a deacon when he was a thirty-one, and then a priest five years later.<sup>337</sup> When he was 49, he was ordained bishop of Constantinople, and he immediately sought to reform the clergy and laity. Sometime around 386-387 A.D., Chrysostom preached nine

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<sup>334</sup> Ambrose, “On Repentance” I.XVI.90, 754.

<sup>335</sup> Ambrose, “On Repentance” II.II.12, 763.

<sup>336</sup> Gus George Christo, introduction to “On Repentance and Almsgiving.” In Vol. 96 of *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998), xi.

<sup>337</sup> Christo, xi.

homilies on repentance in Antioch.<sup>338</sup> Throughout these homilies, Chrysostom insists that repentance is the foundation of the Church, and there is not membership in the Church without repentance.<sup>339</sup> Chrysostom says, “Repentance opens heaven, admits into paradise, defeats the devil (which is why I frequently discourse about it) just as boldness causes us to trip and fall... I never stop saying these things; and if you sin every day, repent every day.”<sup>340</sup>

Saint John Chrysostom was a bishop and patriarch of Constantinople who became famous for his preaching and treatises on Scripture.<sup>341</sup> It is thought that he wrote his treatise *On the Priesthood* to explain the great dignity and responsibility of the priesthood and episcopate and to explain his own inadequacy for the role and why he declined being consecrated a bishop with his friend Basil.<sup>342</sup> These events are all described in the treatise itself, and it is possible that the document was written later when John Chrysostom was himself ordained a priest.<sup>343</sup>

In his treatise *On the Priesthood*, John Chrysostom speaks of the priesthood and the “power” of the priesthood. He describes the priesthood as something that is “discharged upon earth, but it ranks among celestial ordinances.”<sup>344</sup> Chrysostom continues by stating that “no man, no angel, no archangel, no other created power, but the Comforter Himself appointed this

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<sup>338</sup> Christo, xv.

<sup>339</sup> Christo, xvii.

<sup>340</sup> John Chrysostom, “On Repentance and Almsgiving,” 8.4, in Vol. 96 of *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, trans. Gus George Christo (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 112.

<sup>341</sup> Johnson, 171.

<sup>342</sup> T. Allen Moxon, introduction to *On the Priesthood* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1932), xv.

<sup>343</sup> Moxon, xvii.

<sup>344</sup> John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, III.4, trans. Rev. T. Allen Moxon (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1932), 61.

order and persuaded us while still abiding in the flesh to represent the angelic ministry.”<sup>345</sup> The priesthood then, comes directly from God the Holy Spirit, and it involves a supernatural power that is above that of men.

Chrysostom then goes on to describe the specific supernatural power that is given to priests, and he focuses on the power to forgive sins. Chrysostom points out that priests “have received an authority which God has given neither to angels nor to archangels.”<sup>346</sup> He then specifically delineates the precise moment that priests were given this power: “It has never been said to them, “What things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound also in heaven; and what things soever ye shall loose, shall be loosed.”<sup>347</sup> Chrysostom implies that it is with these words that Jesus gave the Apostles, and therefore all priests, the power to forgive sins. He compares this power with the merely human power of those in authority on earth by saying, “Those who are lords upon the earth have indeed the power of binding, but over bodies only; but this binding touches the soul itself, and reaches through heaven, and all things that the priests shall do on earth, God ratifies above, and the Master confirms the decisions of His servants.”<sup>348</sup> Chrysostom understood that this power to forgive sins lies only within the priesthood and it is a supernatural power that comes directly from God Himself.

According to Chrysostom, this power to forgive sins is a heavenly power, and it is the greatest of all powers because it is power of God. Indeed He has given them nothing less than the whole authority of heaven... I see that the Son has placed it all in their hands; for they are as

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<sup>345</sup> John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, III.4, trans. Rev. T. Allen Moxon (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1932), 61.

<sup>346</sup> John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood* III.5, 64.

<sup>347</sup> John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood* III.5, 64.

<sup>348</sup> John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood* III.5, 64.

though they were already translated to heaven, and had transcended human nature, and were freed from our passions and so have been raised to this great office.”<sup>349</sup>

Like the Shepherd of Hermas, Chrysostom sees a connection of this power with the sacrament of Baptism. For it is through the sacrament of Baptism and through the forgiveness of sins at the hands of a priest that one can be saved. Chrysostom declares the following:

If a man cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven except he be regenerated through water and the Spirit, and he who eateth not the Lord’s Flesh and drinketh not His Blood is excluded from everlasting life, and all these things are brought to pass through no one else but only through those hallowed hands, I mean the priest’s, how shall any one, without their help, be able to escape the fire of hell, or to obtain the crowns which awaits us?<sup>350</sup>

It is Christ acting through priests that save people from their sins and therefore from death and the fires of hell. Like the shepherd of Hermas, Chrysostom recognized the need for the forgiveness of sins after Baptism, and like Ignatius of Antioch, who put so much emphasis on receiving forgiveness of sins through communion with the bishop, Chrysostom emphasizes the need for priests to forgive sins.

Similar to Jerome, Chrysostom compares the spiritual wound of sin on the soul to that of a physical sickness. He points out that “The priests of the Jews had authority to cure leprosy of the body, or rather not to cure it but only to examine those who have been cured. And you know how the office of the priest was at that time an object of eager contention. But our Priests have received absolute authority not over leprosy of the body but over uncleanness of the soul, and not to examine it when cured but to cure it.”<sup>351</sup> Here, Chrysostom compares the wound of sin to that of the physical wound of leprosy. While the Jewish priests could not cure bodily leprosy, they

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<sup>349</sup> John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood* III.5, 64-65.

<sup>350</sup> John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood* III.5, 65.

<sup>351</sup> John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood* III.6, 66

could recognize when someone had received such cleansing through the power of God. In contrast, the Christian priest can deliver someone from the spiritual wound of sin for they have received the power not just to determine whether someone has been delivered from spiritual wounds, but the power to do so themselves. Not only does the priest have the supernatural power to heal the soul of the wound of sin, but he also has the power to reconcile the sinner with God: “Priests have often appeased the anger, not only of rulers or of kings, but even of God.”<sup>352</sup>

### **The Rule of Saint Basil**

While Saint Basil may be primarily known for his role in church politics and his theological writings, he is was also a father of the monastic movement and a leader in reforming the ascetical life.<sup>353</sup> Basil promoted the development of ascetic communities of monks who lived together rather than apart as hermits. Recognizing man as a social being created in the image and likeness of God, who is a Trinity of persons, Basil therefore established a rule of life to be lived in community with others.<sup>354</sup> In promoting the development of the ascetic life, Basil went on preaching tours and gave conferences during which the monks would ask Basil about the practicalities and specifics of living the ascetic life.<sup>355</sup> His replies were then recorded and collected in a body of work called the *Asketikon*.<sup>356</sup> This *Asketikon* was expanded over the course of Basil’s life and was then the basis for the rule of Saint Basil that was developed over the coming years by a monk named Rufinus of Aquileia who was a monk in the west.

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<sup>352</sup> John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood* III.6, 67.

<sup>353</sup> Anna M. Silvas, introduction to *The Rule of St. Basil in Latin and English: A Revised Critical Edition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>354</sup> Silvas, 7.

<sup>355</sup> Silvas, 7-8.

<sup>356</sup> Silvas, 7-8.

In the rule of Saint Basil, which was developed in the latter years of the fourth century, there are specific questions about how to deal with penitents and those in sin. Question 16 of the rule asks “How shall we correct or amend the sinner?”<sup>357</sup> The reply indicates that a brother must be confronted and rebuked when he sins and if he does not listen, then one is instructed to “tell it to the church,” in the hopes that he will listen to the church for “his salvation.”<sup>358</sup> This question in the rule of Saint Basil makes it clear that there was a process for going to the church in regards to the repentance of a sinner.

In question 17, the rule makes it clear that repentance must be made for even “small sins”<sup>359</sup> since “no sin whatever may be regarded as ‘small’ or treated lightly.”<sup>360</sup> Question 18 then follows by asking, “How should one repent for each sin?”<sup>361</sup> The replies in the following questions (18-20) indicate that it is necessary to do good works to make up for the sins, thus indicating some sort of penance that must be made.<sup>362</sup> This is followed by the question of whether “one who wishes to confess his sins confess them to all and sundry, or only to certain ones?”<sup>363</sup> Notice that there is no question about whether or not the sins should be confessed. This seems to be assumed; instead, the question revolves around the manner of how the confession should take place and what is necessary for repentance. The reply to the question of who should hear the confession indicates a sensitivity to the sinner and a concern for his well-being. The reply dictates that “Since the manner of repentance should be appropriate and worthy fruit be

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<sup>357</sup> Basil, *The Rule of St. Basil in Latin and English: A Revised Critical Edition*, Q 16, trans. Anna M. Silvas (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 123.

<sup>358</sup> Basil, Q 16, 123.

<sup>359</sup> Basil, Q 16, 125.

<sup>360</sup> Basil, see footnote 75, 125.

<sup>361</sup> Basil, Q 18, 127.

<sup>362</sup> Basil, Q 18-20, 127.

<sup>363</sup> Basil, Q 21, 129.



shown by those turning from sin through their repentance...it seems necessary that sins be confessed to those entrusted with the stewardship of the Mysteries of God.”<sup>364</sup> This reply makes it clear that it is to the priests that a confession of sins should be made. The rule goes on further to give examples from Scriptures, indicating that “in the gospel, they confessed their sins to John the Baptist and in the Acts of the Apostles, to the apostles, by whom they were also baptized.”<sup>365</sup>

Once again, sensitivity is shown to the penitent in the reply to the question of “With what kind of disposition or what sensibility should he who rebukes rebuke?”<sup>366</sup> The one who hears the confession is instructed to “adopt the disposition which a father and physician adopts towards his own ailing son, especially when the manner of the treatment appears more distressing and grievous.”<sup>367</sup> Similar to Aphrahat’s discussion of sin and illness and remedies, Basil states that the sinner should accept the rebuke “just as an ailing son of one who is both his father and physician, who is solicitous for his life.”<sup>368</sup> The rule goes on to praise the act of repenting by condemning those who “justify sinners”<sup>369</sup> and praising the one who “repents from the heart”<sup>370</sup> while condemning those who are unrepentant.<sup>371</sup>

It is clear from these passages that the oral confession of sins is not only praised but is expected. The question does not arise of whether or not to confess one’s sins and to seek

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<sup>364</sup> Basil, Q 21, 129.

<sup>365</sup> Basil, Q 21, 129.

<sup>366</sup> Basil, Q 23, 131.

<sup>367</sup> Basil, Q 23, 131.

<sup>368</sup> Basil, Q 24, 131.

<sup>369</sup> Basil, Q 26, 133.

<sup>370</sup> Basil, Q 27, 133.

<sup>371</sup> Basil, Q 28, 134.

repentance, but rather the questions and replies center around the treatment of the repentant ones who confess in contrast to those who remain unrepentant.

### **Development of Doctrine in the Fourth Century**

During the fourth century, the doctrine on Penance continued to develop in the same direction as it had in the third century.<sup>372</sup> However, after the Edict of Milan, Christians were free to worship, and there was no longer the urgent question of reconciling those who had apostatized or were in danger of death from persecution. Instead, the Church was now open to “worldly vice-ridden masses” and the writings of this time take on a distinctly pastoral tone.<sup>373</sup> All four writers, Aphrahat, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and Basil, speak of sin as an illness or wound in need of healing. They also refer to the ministers of the church as physicians who are called upon to bring healing to those who are spiritually sick. Here, we see an illustration of Newman’s principle that the seed of truth does not change but grows according to the historical needs of the time, and this growth is part of the natural process of maturation. In previous centuries, the writings on penance focused on a conversion of heart and turning back to God, while in the fourth century, the focus is on healing. The seed of truth remains the same. Sin is a spiritual sickness that separates us from God and the Church, and Penance brings us back to God and heals the wound of sin. Ambrose and John Chrysostom reiterate that the power to forgive sins is a supernatural power that comes from God and is given to the ministers of the Church. This reiterates the seed of truth we have seen throughout the centuries that Penance must be conferred through the legitimate authority of the Church established by God. In the fourth century, this idea naturally develops

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<sup>372</sup> Poschmann, 81.

<sup>373</sup> Poschmann, 82-83.

and matures as sin is described as a sickness, and the ministers are now described as physicians who bring spiritual healing.

## Chapter 5

### Penance at the End of the Patristic Period

Towards the end of the Patristic Age, it is clear that the oral confession of sins is presumed as a part of the practice of the Sacrament of Penance, which bestows the forgiveness of sins. This practice is a natural part of the way in which the penitent obtains the forgiveness of their sins and is reconciled to the community through the authority of a minister of the Church. There are three documents from this time period that refer to the forgiveness of sins after Baptism, and it will be demonstrated that all three documents presume the oral confession of one's sins. These three documents also stress the importance of performing acts of penance for one's sins. In order for the proper penance to be assigned, it is necessary for the sin to be known and that could only happen if the penitent verbally made known the sin.

#### Saint Augustine of Hippo

Written between 400-430, Saint Augustine's sermon *To the Catechumens Regarding the Creed* was preached to the catechumens probably during the season of Lent when they were preparing for their reception into the Church at the Easter Vigil.<sup>374</sup> In this sermon, Augustine gives the catechumens advice on how they should live after their baptism. He states, "When you have been baptized, hold fast to a good life in the commandments of God, that you may guard your Baptism even unto the end. I do not tell you that you will live here without sin: but they are venial, without which this life is not. For the sake of all sins was Baptism provided; for the sake of light sins, without which we cannot be, was prayer provided."<sup>375</sup> Augustine recognizes that

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<sup>374</sup> Johnson, 36.

<sup>375</sup> Augustine "On the Creed: A Sermon to Catechumens," 15, in Vol. 3 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (St. Augustin: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises)*, ed. Philip Schaff

Christians sin, even after they receive the sacrament of Baptism. Therefore, the Church provides a way for these sins to be forgiven, even if they are more serious sins.

In this homily, Augustine expounds upon each line of the Creed. When he reaches the line about believing in “the of sins,” Augustine emphasizes the abundant mercy of God in forgiving sins.<sup>376</sup> He assures the catechumens that there is no sin they could commit that will not be forgiven: ”Name any heinous thing you have committed, heavy, horrible, which you shudder even to think of,”<sup>377</sup> and it too will be forgiven. Augustine makes the distinction between lesser or venial sins, and more serious sins, but acknowledges that these can be forgiven, and the sinner must do penance for these more serious sins. He states, “Do not commit sins that separate you from Christ’s body—may these be far from you. Those whom you see doing penance have committed heinous things, either adultery or some enormous crimes; for these they do penance. Because if theirs had been light sins, to blot out these, daily prayer would suffice.”<sup>378</sup>

Augustine lists three ways in which sins are forgiven in the Church. He explains, "In three ways then are sins remitted in the Church; by Baptism, by prayer, by the greater humility of penance. Yet God does not remit sins but to the baptized. When? At the time of their baptism. The sins later on remitted through prayer and penance are forgiven to the baptized.”<sup>379</sup> Verbal confession of sins must be assumed here. Augustine stresses to the newly baptized that their sins

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(Buffalo, NY: The Christian Literature Company, 1887), 374, accessed July 9, 2019, <https://holybooks-lichtenbergpress.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/VOL-3-Nicene-and-post-Nicene-fathers-of-the-Christian-church.pdf>.

<sup>376</sup> Augustine, 15, 374.

<sup>377</sup> Augustine, 15, 374.

<sup>378</sup> Augustine, 15, 375.

<sup>379</sup> Augustine, 15, 375.

can be forgiven, and penance performed for more serious sins, but these sins can only be known by the minister of the Church if the penitent has made them known.

## **Saint Jerome**

In his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Saint Jerome (345-420 AD) seems to make a rather offhand comment concerning auricular confession. Saint Jerome discusses how it is possible for a man to misuse his tongue and therefore speaks of the devil as a serpent and detractor who leads others astray. He is pointing out how easy it can be for people to ignore those who are wiser and more experienced and allow oneself to be led astray by the devil, thus becoming heretics, or the followers of heretics, falling prey to heresy.<sup>380</sup> One of the remedies for this and protections against being led astray is to not only to listen to those who are wiser, but to confess to them and open one's weaknesses and failures to them.

Jerome comments, "If the serpent, the devil, secretly bites anyone, and, unobserved, infects that man with the venom of sin, and if the person who was struck stays quiet and does not repent, and refuses to confess his wound to a brother and a teacher, the brother and teacher who have the tongue for curing him, will not easily be able to help him."<sup>381</sup> Jerome also makes the statement, "If a sick man is embarrassed to confess a wound to his doctor, medicine does not heal what it is unaware of."<sup>382</sup> By making this comparison to a physical wound or ailment, Jerome is making clear that sin is a wound of the soul, and the wound must be confessed and

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<sup>380</sup> Richard J. Goodrich, and David J. D. Miller, introduction to "St. Jerome: Commentary on Ecclesiastes," in No. 66 of *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation* (New York: The Newman Press, 2012), 9.

<sup>381</sup> Jerome. "Commentary on Ecclesiastes," 10:11, in No. 66 of *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*, trans. and ed. Richard J. Goodrich and David J. D. Miller (New York: The Newman Press, 2012), 114.

<sup>382</sup> Jerome, 10:11, 114.

stated out loud in order to be healed. It is a hidden wound that cannot be seen, therefore it must be confessed and revealed to one who can heal it, a spiritual doctor of sorts, or as Jerome calls him, a “brother and teacher.” Jerome makes very clear here out loud.

### **The Irish Penitentials**

The Irish Penitentials (457-591 AD) is a body of literature that contains books of Church rules developed by the Irish monks in the early Middle Ages. Poschmann explains that because of its physical isolation, the Celtic Church differed somewhat in its practices of worship and discipline.<sup>383</sup> He asserts that the Irish Church “had no knowledge of the institution of a public ecclesiastical penance that could not be repeated.”<sup>384</sup> Penance in the Irish Church was private and it consisted in the confession of sins, the acceptance of a penance for satisfaction given by the priest, and reconciliation with God and the Church. The penitential books were used by the confessors and gave precise and specific penances for all offences grave or minor.<sup>385</sup> These *Penitentials* list the penances that must be performed for certain specific sins. These penitentials demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of penance that seems to take for granted that sins must be confessed by specific kind and number so the appropriate penance may be given. It would be impossible to confer the penance without knowing the sin. The oral confession of sins is assumed and is treated as something that is obvious and ordinary.

The earliest of these penitentials is the document referred to as the *First Synod of St. Patrick*.<sup>386</sup> Bieler points out that while “technically speaking, it is not a penitential,” it is

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<sup>383</sup> Bernard Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, trans. Francis Courtney, S.J. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 124.

<sup>384</sup> Poschmann, 124.

<sup>385</sup> Poschmann, 124.

<sup>386</sup> Ludwig Bieler, ed., *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1963), 1.

however, “the earliest surviving document concerning ecclesiastical discipline in Ireland” and it does contain “penitential matter.”<sup>387</sup> The document in question possibly dates from a synod held in 457 AD during the time of Saint Patrick’s mission to Ireland.<sup>388</sup> This does not mean that Saint Patrick actually wrote the document, but that it “was issued with his express approval.”<sup>389</sup> The next known Penitentials were written during sometime during the 6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>390</sup> The penitentials outline the different types of sins and list them in detail.<sup>391</sup> Some penitentials list the sins according to more general groups such as distinguishing between sins in thought and sins in deed as in the *Penitential of Vinnian*, or in the *Penitential of Cummean*, the sins and penances are grouped according to the capital sins.<sup>392</sup>

The *First Synod of St. Patrick* identifies certain sins that would require excommunication as a consequence.<sup>393</sup> It also lists certain sins, such as murder and adultery, that require a year of penance before the sinner “shall present himself...and then be freed of his obligation by a priest.”<sup>394</sup> This mandate makes it clear that the sin must somehow be confessed or made known to the priest in order for the penance to be received and the sin to be forgiven. The other penitentials likewise list sins and corresponding penances that must be accomplished in order to make up for the sin.

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<sup>387</sup> Bieler, 2.

<sup>388</sup> Bieler, 2.

<sup>389</sup> Bieler, 2.

<sup>390</sup> Bieler, 3-4.

<sup>391</sup> Bieler, 4.

<sup>392</sup> Bieler, 4-5.

<sup>393</sup> Bieler, 55-57.

<sup>394</sup> Bieler, 57.



Throughout the Irish Penitentials, the ministry of the priest as confessor and arbiter of the appropriate penance is clear. Poschman notes that “the ecclesiastical and sacramental aspect of penance stands forth clearly. It is only efficacious through the ministry of the priest.”<sup>395</sup> In these penitentials, priests are seen as the ordinary ministers of the sacrament of Penance along with the bishop. The function of the priest as the arbiter of the appropriate penance in light of the penitential book is a “judicial function of the priest [that] presupposes confession, which makes known to him the state of soul of the sinner.”<sup>396</sup> Poschman also notes that while these penitential books may have originated in monasteries, they were also widely used by the lay faithful. He explains that “Here we have a link between this sacramental ecclesiastical penance which allows of repetition and the frequent confession which was practiced in monasteries and pious lay circles...As the care of souls among the Celts was largely in the hands of the monks, the extension of monastic practice to the laity occurred quite naturally.”<sup>397</sup>

The Irish Penitentials make it clear that by the end of the Patristic Age, auricular confession of one’s sins was common and prevalent. It could often be accompanied by spiritual direction and guidance since the penances often corresponded not simply to the sin but also to the spiritual needs of the penitent. This more sophisticated, comprehensive, and precise system of sins with corresponding penances and specific directives for how to guide the penitent could only arise from a long tradition of the practice of oral confession of sins.

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<sup>395</sup> Poschmann, 129.

<sup>396</sup> Poschmann, 129.

<sup>397</sup> Poschmann, 129-130.

## **Development of Doctrine at the End of the Patristic Period**

At the end of the Patristic age, there is a movement toward more frequent auricular confession, which can especially be seen in the Irish Penitentials. The practice evolved from the early centuries where Penance was received once after Baptism, to the practice of repeated confession of sins to a priest where the faithful could also be instructed by him and receive fitting penances corresponding to individual sins. Once again, we see Newman's principle of an authentic development of doctrine according to the natural growth and maturation of an idea. In the fourth century, sin was seen as a spiritual sickness or wound in need of healing from the priest who acted as a spiritual physician and provided healing through the power of God. The natural growth and development of this idea would recognize that, just as one can be physically sick and in need of a doctor more than once throughout life, one can also be spiritually ill and in need of more frequent spiritual healing.

## Conclusion

As we can see from the primary source passages from the early centuries of the Church, there was some primitive practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation which included confession of sins, a time of penance, and pardon given by the leaders of the Church. Although the practice of this sacrament changed over the course of the first seven centuries, the essential elements of confession, penance, and the ministers of the Church were always consistent. How forgiveness was administered, what sins should be confessed, and how long the time of penance should be all changed according to the times and adapting to the needs of the faithful at that time. This does not mean that the Church changed her beliefs on the sacrament of Reconciliation over the years, or that she invented new practices at certain times in history. Rather, a natural development of doctrine occurred as described by John Henry Newman. The seeds of doctrine were always there and over the years these seeds have grown, matured, and developed, until we have the present time.

Three seeds of doctrine regarding the sacrament of Reconciliation can be identified, namely, confession, penance, and forgiveness by God through the ministers of the Church. The writings of the Church Fathers give us evidence that these seeds were always present and that over time, as the Church grappled with persecution, apostasy, and the acknowledgement of both public and private sins, these seeds have grown and flourished as our understanding of the reconciliation provided by the Church has grown and flourished. Shifting times with new contexts and new questions means that new challenges arise, and new ways are needed to interpret the teachings of Christ. In different contexts, and in different places and times, it is necessary to reinterpret and think again about the meaning of Christian Revelation in order to apply it to the present times and to address the present circumstances. It is natural that the shape

of Christian doctrine changes over time. While the doctrine remains essentially the same, the shape of it changes, just as a growing organism is still the same organism, but its shape necessarily changes as it grows. If the shape is not changing, then growth is not happening, and the organism remains stagnant and eventually dies. It is the same with the doctrine of the Church. It is a living and dynamic reality that must change and develop. In different contexts and times, it might look a little different because different aspects of the doctrine or of the Christian message would be highlighted or emphasized at different times depending on the needs or questions of the times.

According to Newman, the whole of human history is a developmental process, and therefore it would follow that the understanding of Christian Tradition and Revelation was also a developmental process. In and through the course of history, our understanding of who God is and how we are to relate to him will always be affected and shaped to some degree by the times and place in which we find ourselves. Therefore, we constantly need to rethink, reinterpret, and comprehend the meaning of the Christian message according to the time and place in which we find ourselves. As *Dei Verbum* states in paragraph 8:

The Tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on. This comes about in various ways. It comes through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts. It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience. And it comes from the preaching of those who have received, along with their right of succession in the episcopate, the sure charism of truth. Thus, as the centuries go by, the Church is always advancing towards the plenitude of divine truth, until eventually the words of God are fulfilled in her.<sup>398</sup>

This is especially seen in the development of the Church's teaching on the sacrament of Penance. Through studying the early Church fathers, it can be shown that the doctrine regarding penance

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<sup>398</sup> Austin Flannery, ed., *Dei Verbum, Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), 754.

has developed over time. The practice of Confession, as we know it today, was not arbitrarily constructed by man but organically developed out of what Christ handed onto the apostles. It is clear from the Patristic writings that the Church has always believed in the need for confession after baptism and that the Church has always believed that Christ conferred to His Church the authority to reconcile sinners to God. While “the concrete form in which the Church has exercised [the power to forgive sins] received from the Lord has varied considerably,”<sup>399</sup> “beneath the changes in discipline and celebration that this sacrament has undergone over the centuries, the same fundamental structure is to be discerned.”<sup>400</sup> What is this fundamental structure? The Catechism of the Catholic Church lists the essential elements: “contrition, confession, and satisfaction” on the part of the penitent, and “God’s action through the intervention of the Church.”<sup>401</sup> The Catechism goes on to explain that “The Church, who through the bishop and his priests forgives sins in the name of Jesus Christ and determines the manner of satisfaction, also prays for the sinner and does penance with him. Thus, the sinner is healed and re-established in ecclesial communion.”<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed., (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 1447.

<sup>400</sup> Catechism, 1448.

<sup>401</sup> Catechism, 1448.

<sup>402</sup> Catechism, 1448.

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