

# A Penance Service

by Hamish Swanston

There is a trade of manners in the Church. The way one sacrament is celebrated influences, in time, the liturgy of others. This has been most evident in the recent history of the Eucharist and Penance.

Penance, in the days immediately before Pius X, had pretensions to be a private business between priest and penitent in a box. It was individual and it was frequent. When Pius X made Communion frequent a great many people set about making it individual. Often enough communion was taken from the community context, and men went daily to communion before or after Mass. Even when communion was received within the Mass, efforts were made to maintain privacy for the communicant. Everyone came up quietly (my seminary Rector made a huge fuss when some of us looked up open-eyed as he passed down the line) and, having been quietly given a host from yesterday's ciborium, they went quietly back to make a little cave with their hands, opening them a little perhaps when the Leonine prayers warned them that a demon was wandering through the world for the ruin of souls, and quickly shutting them again.

All this is done with. The Eucharist has come out into the open again, and now in turn Penance is venturing forth.

Penance has become popular. And this in two senses of the phrase. More people are taking part in the ecclesial forgiveness of God, and they are more often doing so as members one of another rather than as single men. Penance services of various kinds are being devised to answer the community's demand. In general these services are not wildly exciting and extremist experiments but rather they are reconstructions of ancient forms in manners appropriate to the present demand of the Church. They occur wherever a congregation takes the *Confiteor* and its accompanying prayers seriously.

The actual form of our *Confiteor* seems to derive from late Carolingian prayers, like those of the Amiens Sacramentary, recited by the priest and his clerical assistants as they walked to the sanctuary for the eucharist. Gradually, in the eleventh century, the *Confiteor* and the *Misereatur*, which were already being used by laymen (cf. Jungmann, *Die lateinischen Bussriten*, 270f, 282f; *Missarum Sollemnia*, Eng. trans. I, 300), were joined by the *Indulgentiam*. This Jungmann finds 'the surprising thing' for it was 'at this time, and continued to be for several centuries, the regular expression of the priest's *sacramental* absolution'. In some places there was confession, at this point,

of particular sins. This scandalizes some liturgical commentators, since 'there is question here not of secret confession but of public' (*Missarum Sollemnia*, Eng. trans. I, 303).

There is evidence that in some parts of Germany in the eleventh century the sacramental confessional form was transferred, *in the vernacular*, to the eucharistic liturgy and placed immediately after the homily so that the congregation could be encouraged in penitence by the words of the preacher. Jungmann remarks that 'of course it was well known even then that this type of general absolution, without a special individual confession, was not in itself enough for mortal sins' (*ibid.*, 493). However 'well known' it had yet to be 'inculcated very emphatically' (*ibid.*) that this confession of sin to the priest and the congregation of the faithful, followed by the sacramental form of absolution and the imposition of a penance, was not a sacramental situation.

Certainly the relic of this confession-situation we now enjoy at episcopal Masses in the granting of an indulgence is clearly not intended to arouse any curiosity in the congregation as to what is going on precisely. Our general delight on being given a green-shield stamp of the spiritual life distracts us from asking awkward questions.

We have, therefore, as immediate fore-runners of the present Penance Service, the clerical *Confiteor* and its attraction of the sacramental *Indulgentiam* into the common liturgy, the homily of exhortation with the congregational response acknowledging sin and accepting penance, and the pontifical indulgence. My experience, which includes services in Europe and in North and South America, of primary school children and retired nurses, of nuns' retreats and undergraduate chaplaincies, as well as those conducted in parish churches, is that the usual structure of modern Penance Services reflects in a most conservative manner the pattern of these traditional fore-runners.

In general Penance Services, whether or not they are intended to be fore-Mass substitutes, are shaped somewhat like this:

- (i) a hymn of praise: we are *celebrating* the divine forgiveness in the community, not rummaging in the cellars of our guilt;
- (ii) an homily;

I present here what I said at a Penance Service in a Connecticut parish earlier this year as an example but not, of course, as a paradigm:

'The scribes at Capernaum properly demanded: "Who can forgive sins but God? ". There is no human power can take away a man's sin. And yet we dare to say to one another: "You are forgiven." We take upon ourselves the management of things. We exercise the divine prerogative.

'Our present ability to mediate divine forgiveness to our fellows comes to us through our human kinship with Jesus.

'God was in Jesus reconciling the world to himself. Men recognized this. They came to him asking that they be given freedom from their sins. This was his ministry for the men of his time in Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem. This is his ministry for the men of every time and place. Whereas while "he went about doing good" in "the time of his flesh", his Spirit of forgiveness could be encountered only at one place at any given time, by his death on the Cross he has handed over his Spirit to us for all times and places.

'In our human meeting we encounter the divine. The Christian lives in a fellowship of forgiveness; he makes his own the words of Lear to Cordelia:

When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down  
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live  
And pray and sing.

'It is impossible now for us to be reconciled with one another unless we are reconciled with our Father. It is impossible for us to be reconciled with our Father unless we are reconciled with one another: "When you stand in prayer, forgive whatever you have against anybody, so that your Father in heaven may forgive your failings too" (Mark 11, 25). And we may pray never to be so caught in our own unforgiving temper as Queen Elizabeth I who swore to the Countess of Nottingham "that God might pardon her but she never could".

'The Spirit drives us on to forgive each other. He enables us to bring his forgiveness to each other. In every situation there continue both the human need of divine forgiveness and the effective prayer for forgiveness in the community of the Spirit. 'I'll tell you a tale of what we're doing here.

'Once upon a Saturday night in the first century the men of Ephesus heard Uncle George singing home from the Coressos Gate and all along the Marble Street, which, says the guide-book, "had an excellent sewer, and was decorated with statues, fountains and marble blocks for resting"; Uncle George serenaded the statues, dunked his head in the fountains, and rested. In the morning Aunt Bessy, who has two husbands, one drunk and one sober, and loves them both, came holding hands with him to the Eucharist. Mary, too, has come, with John all inky-fingered from his desk. Uncle George wants everyone to know that he is sorry for the rumpus:

I confess to you brethren. . . .

'He realizes that he has brought the name of the Christians into disrepute, that pagan and Jewish Ephesians will be gossiping in the market-place, on boats and while driving chariots, about "those Christians", and telling how one of 'em woke up the whole neighbourhood singing a bawdy song to the statue of the Town Clerk "which only shows how ungrateful they all

are to anyone who tries to help them" (cf. Acts 19, 35f). Uncle George knows that in his carousels he has, "not to overstate the case", in "some degree caused pain to all of you" (II Cor. 2, 5); he wants to say that he is sorry for the damage he has done the whole Church:

to all the saints. . . .

'Paul, on his last visit, taught Uncle George too that disorderly conduct takes a part with all the forces of chaos in the world of "telegrams and anger", with prejudice and meanness and war; he knows he has joined in the human rebellion:

to almighty God.

'And the Ephesians bring him into the shared forgiveness:

May the almighty and merciful Lord grant us pardon and absolution and remission for all our sins.

'Sometimes, of course, a man may better confess to the president of the assembly, out of general hearing, and this for community reasons. Aunt Ella cannot get up and declare that she has conspired with a couple of others to rob the municipal treasury without involving the community in uncharitable moments of wondering who was in it with her. The important thing is not the publicity or the privacy of the confession but that Christians recognize that a share in the divine forgiveness is given in the human community. As it was with the Ephesian Uncle and Aunt so it is with us. In this penitential assembly of the faithful we come together, knowing that we have sinned against each other, against all men, and against the Lord who yet gives us courage to call him still our Father';

- (iii) a recitation of the *Our Father* to preserve a sense of confidence: 'the Spirit of Jesus is continual forgiveness of Sin; he who waits to be righteous before he enters into the Saviour's kingdom, the Divine Body, will never enter there' (Blake, *Jerusalem*, 64, 3);
- (iv) a recitation of the first half of the *Confiteor* (sometimes another expression of communal penitence occurs here, but, despite the fact that fewer and fewer children know the prayer, the structure of this confession of sin is so fit that it is not easily bettered; sometimes a minister who has the gift may compose a confession prayer which is adapted to his own community and its problems, or ask a literate member of the congregation to do so, this has to be duplicated or printed if the appropriate communal recitation is to be preserved);
- (v) a silent consideration for some minutes of what it means for us to be sinners before our Father;
- (vi) a recitation of the second half of the *Confiteor*;
- (vii) the imposition of a corporate penance which is designed to make a real demand on the charity of the community—this, in America at least, is generally concerned with some small project for the betterment of others;

(viii) the *Indulgentiam* (this is sometimes recited by every member of the congregation if the parish priest has encouraged his community to appreciate so far their sharing in the one priesthood, but often is said by the ordained minister over the whole community as he makes the sign of the Cross);

(ix) a second hymn of praise.

This Service commonly takes about twenty minutes.

Evidently the eleventh century practices have exercised a large influence upon the structuring of this form of Penance Service. There may well be other patterns which I have not come across. I have heard of Services which have substituted for elements (iv) to (viii) a dispersal of the congregation to confessionals where several priests were stationed.

Neither those who read the latest Dutch theologian, nor those who are un-nerved by guitars in the transepts, should complain of this modern revival of ancient practice. If they do feel like grumbling let us hope that they will turn to one another and say, 'Anybody you forgive, I forgive' (II Cor. 2, 10), so that we may truly be a community of the forgiven.