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Repentance and forgiveness: Classical and patristic perspectives on a reformation theme

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This article argues that from classical to early modern times, repentance and forgiveness have been experienced as desired qualities for human coexistence in a fallible world. The early church Fathers reveal a basic continuity in expression of repentance between Christianity and the classical world, as the church sometimes resorted to prevailing cultural mechanisms for reconciliation. These included a common evaluation of the past and the public commitment to a different way of life. Christianity emphasised the vertical dimension of repentance, as it insisted on God as an involved party who was transgressed against by any form of horizontal human sin. This went far beyond the occasional provocation of individual gods by arrogance but was personal and relational in character. The church integrated the practice of repentance and conversion through special days and seasons, as well as by an emphasis on the Holy Scriptures as the divine standard for human living. Although formats differed, the theological notions show a spiritual agreement and consistency. For repentance to qualify for forgiveness, a baptised Christian required conviction of sin, reconciliation through God's appointed means, and a proven new course of behaviour that complied with divine standards.

Keywords: repentance; forgiveness; penance; sacraments; baptism.

Introduction: Repentance as requirement with Trent and Heidelberg

Throughout its existence, Christianity has wrestled with the notion of human weakness and failure. In the New Testament, holy baptism and conversion were the remedy for sins committed in one's worldly past (cf. Ac 2:8–10, 16–19). But what was to do when professing Christians failed their God and fellow believers? After a transgression, were they automatically restored to God and the church alike based on a profession of faith in Jesus? Throughout most of its history, Christianity has answered this question in the negative. Clear repentance was required before restoration was thought possible. From the later Middle Ages, with the first Lateran Council as indicator, the church developed a general system to assure itself that the faithful who took part in the Holy Eucharist, had repented of their sins and were committed to a new way of life.

The 14th session of the Council of Trent (1551), *De Sacramento Poenitentiae*, sharply analysed the elements of the process of repentance and forgiveness from a Scriptural perspective. When a baptised Christian falls into sin, canon four distinguishes three necessary requirements for restoration to take place. There needs to be sorrow for sins committed (*contritionem*), confession of wrongdoing (*confessionem*), satisfaction for harm done, and a firm purpose of amendment (*satisfactionem*) must be shown. A realisation that one has sinned and confidence that Jesus's sacrifice would satisfy for this, was not deemed sufficient. For Trent this only leads to self-deception for people with an imaginary heaven on their way to hell: *anathema sit* (cf Schaff 2017: *Sessio Decimaquarta,* 25/11/1551). Interestingly, these sentiments are shared by the church of the Reformation at the time. Twelve years after this session of Trent, the Reformed theologians Olevianus and Ursinus (1563) would structure the Heidelberg Catechism around the three requirements of Trent (session 4, see Schaff [2017] above; also cf. Waterworth 1848:92–104) for Christians to be in a state of grace, and to be able to take communion. The theological focus has been adjusted, but the subject matter is the same: sin, deliverance and a new life. Christians need to be sorry for their sins, seek forgiveness with God and demonstrate a new direction by changed behaviour. In the first section (Olevianus & Ursinus 1563:12–17), believers need to be convicted of their sins. The next division ('der ander Teil', Olevianus & Ursinus 1563:17–58) teaches Christians to seek forgiveness and faith in God and the accomplished work of Christ. The third section of this catechism (Olevianus & Ursinus 1563:58–94) concentrates on Christians keeping the Ten Commandments for life, the *Pater Noster* as pattern for all prayer, and the Apostles' Creed as a doctrinal standard for the faithful mind. Like Trent, the Heidelberg Catechism (Olevianus &

Ursinus 1563:57–58) also puts its contents in the context of discipline and excommunication.

Whether through confession to the local priest in the local church, or by means of ecclesiastical home visits preceding the solemn Lord's Supper Sundays, both branches of Western Christianity sought to establish the presence of repentance, experience of salvation from sins, and a firm commitment to a new way of life, before admission to the Holy Eucharist or Lord's Supper was granted. Repentance and conversion were considered requirements for admission and readmission to Christian Communion. For the medieval and early modern church, it was clear that someone who did not repent of his sins and publicly showed a commitment to a new way of life, had no place in the *ecclesia*; indeed, was not even entitled to a Christian burial.

These notions characterise the church of all times and places and continue to find their place in Protestantism. The extent, however, to which this spiritual process was subjected to institutional rules differed according to the period in history and the context. Martin Luther continued to encourage personal admission of sin to a confessor (Lang 1992:241–261), but to Luther's personal regret, this practice faded out even in his lifetime. Although the obligatory confession before a priest was no longer continued in the churches of the Reformation, the requirements of repentance, forgiveness and proven holiness remained to preserve communion with Christ, and to receive admission to his table. While the Scottish and continental Reformed churches replaced oral confession with ecclesiastical home visits and special sermons aimed at repentance and conversion, the Anglican tradition incorporated the so-called 'Prayer of humble access' (*Book of common prayer*, BCP). This confession of sin was included in the morning Eucharist and followed by a provisional absolution by the priest. The Lutheran Church adopted a similar segment in the liturgy (*Lutheran book of worship*, LBW), when the celebrant turns to the East and confesses his sins together with the congregation.

The common denominator of these Christian traditions is that for repentance to qualify for forgiveness, a baptised Christian required conviction of sin, confession with the aim of forgiveness (absolution) and a proven new course of behaviour. That this shows a remarkable continuity with the medieval practice of the Western Church, as well as the early church in the context of its classical civilisation, will be considered hereafter.

Private confession in the Middle Ages

Gregorius the Great (c. AD 540–604) marks the start of a development in the Western Church, which would eventually lead to a compulsory private oral confession to a priest. Gregory used the practice of monastic life as a template for pastoral care in regular congregations. With a view to the rapidly approaching end of the world, Gregory tells the priests to confront parishioners with their sins and to make amends for specific transgressions. In due course, this leaves

the impression of priests as mediators of forgiveness: '*das Mittelalter wird daraus die Folgerung ziehen, daß die Kirche die Buße als Sakrament verwaltet; es tut damit Gregor keine Gewalt an*' [The Middle Ages would draw the conclusion from this that the Church administers penance as a sacrament; which doesn't do injustice to Gregory] (Andresen 2011:495).

Still, this was not yet the case with Gregory, nor his intention. Repentance was not equalled with penance; it was a much broader concept. The priests did not hand out ecclesiastical punishment but had to stimulate inner and outward penitence. Through a combination of sorrow, pain, and love for God, sin would lose its stranglehold on the believer: '*Für Gregor sind die Strafen aber nicht Kirchenstrafen im Sinne der mittelalterlichen Bußpraxis, sondern er meint, da man unter Tränen die bösen Taten sich vor Augen halten soll*' [For Gregory, however, these punishments are not church punishments in the sense of medieval penitential practice, but he means to say that one should be continually mindful of one's evil deeds and tearfully regret those] (Andresen 2011:476–479).

The institutionalised private confessional practice before a priest, is a phenomenon that belongs to the late medieval and early modern church. Recent publications acknowledge this. The careful reader of a *New history of penance* (Brill 2008), for instance, searches in vain for a chapter on the early church. Admittedly, the aim of this publication was creative rather than judicial, but only two chapters cover the early Middle Ages and late antiquity (Firey 2008:97–148), and even then, these chapters serve to create an understanding for later developments, largely depending on descriptions of monastic life rather than on congregational data. Still, intriguing questions are put, such as whether ecclesiastical penance and forgiveness should be regarded as a form of social manipulation (Firey 2008:3).

Otherwise, the new history of penance only concerns the medieval-Ages and post-Tridentine church. This is understandable, because the church, even in late antiquity, did not have a uniform system, but knew a rich variety (Meens 2014:15). Even detailed studies on the situation in Rome in the 6th century are inconclusive in this regard: 'Historians of Rome must always take caution, that they do not mistake the exceptional for the normal' (Uhalde 2010:10). Later sources from the early medieval period, from AD 600 to 1200, show a lack of uniformity (Meens 2014:2). Where they do provide information, it is clear that this is a far cry from the days of the Contra-Reformation (Meens 2014:10), a later development also shared by Vatican II, when the Catholic Church had come to consider herself as the exclusive mediator of reconciliation with God. Neufeld (1986) explains:

> [*I*]n der Buße geht es um Versöhnung nicht als privates und isoliertes Ereignis, sondern *als* unverzichtbar kirchlich vermitteltes Geschehen. Die Kirche selbst ist 'Kirche der Sünder', und der Sünder ist zu seinem Heil an und in die kirchliche Gemeinschaft verwiesen. Indem er sich mit ihr versöhnt, hat sich Gott mit ihm versöhnt.

[*Repentance is not about reconciliation as a private and isolated event, but as an event that is indispensably mediated by the church. The church itself is 'the church of sinners', and the sinner is referred to and in the church community for his salvation. By being reconciled to her, God has been reconciled with him*]. (p. 61, [author's own translation])

The process of ecclesiastical penance and forgiveness was complicated by another development in the Western Church, namely the medieval distinction between deadly and daily sin, with a more pragmatic than exegetical reference to 1 John 5:16–17. This was combined with the notion of purgatory, where unconfessed daily sins were cleansed by fire until the believer was ready for his heavenly abode. The Eastern Church did not distinguish between venial and mortal sin in principle, as all sin separated from God and conscientious persistence with any evil was considered fatal. After Vatican II, Western thinking integrated concepts from modern psychology to define mortal sin. Where a literal transgression of the Ten Commandments used to qualify for deadly peril for the soul, the present *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994:455) also requires full knowledge and complete concurrence of the will. This leaves a certain amount of vagueness, whether fallible human beings can act with full knowledge; and is it even possible to have a 100% commitment of the will?

Although not everyone regards the fourth Lateran Council (AD 1215) as central to the development of the medieval practice of confession, the decrees of this Council nonetheless indicate the church's stance at the time; or, at least, what the church authorities considered desirable by that time, even if ideal and reality often do not coincide in history.

The *canones* of Lateran IV, for instance, are quite strict on the professional behaviour of bishops. If a bishop twice appointed a bad priest, he lost his right to appoint any (canon 30).[1] Lateran IV also dealt decisively with simony, bribery and substandard salaries for clergy. That the church did not implement the council's rules is clear from Chaucer's *Canterbury tales* to Erasmus's *Lof der zotheid*; from the sighs of Pope Adrian to the royal commissions into clergy abuse in the 21st century, which largely centred on the serial appointments of wrong priests. Had canon 30 of Lateran IV been taken seriously in recent history, many bishops would have lost their authority to appoint clergy.

If the council's rules were not followed regarding bishops, it is unlikely that the situation concerning repentance and forgiveness was any better. Nonetheless, canon 21 requires that parishioners confess their sins to their local priest and attend the Holy Eucharist at least once a year. Garcia (2007) translates this stipulation clearly:

> Any believer of both sexes must – when he has reached the years of distinction – confess his sins with his own priest (*proprio sacerdoti*) at least once a year, do penance as required and piously receive the sacrament of the Eucharist at least with Pascha,

unless he should abstain from reception for a season, for sensible reasons and advised by his own priest. Otherwise he must be barred from church for the remainder of his life and be denied a Christian burial when he dies. This wholesome decision must be announced often in the churches, so that no one can excuse himself on the basis of blindness and pretence of ignorance. If someone, however, has good reason to confess his sins to a priest from elsewhere, he must first ask and receive permission from his own priest, because otherwise this (other) one won't be able to absolve or bind.[2] (p. 20–21)

To protect the faithful, the punishment for priestly indiscretion was severe:

Who dares to reveal a sin that was admitted to him in confession, must according to our decree be removed from priestly service, and also banished to a strict monastery to do eternal penance, as Garcia (2022:20–21) translates it.[3]

The above makes it clear that confession and penance were a private affair in the first instance. This is evident from the rule that if a confessor revealed anything spoken during confession, he was to be removed from the world and locked up in a monastery for the rest of his natural life. This essentially private character of repentance marks a discontinuity with earlier periods. In contrast, the classical world and the Patristic Church very much required public admission of sin and repentance that was visible to all.

Repentance and forgiveness in the classical world

Repentance and forgiveness are phenomena of all times and are not exclusively Christian in nature. The ancient lawmakers among the Hindus and later commentaries defined repentance as a deed of self-inflicted penance. This had the power to burn up bad *karma*, even with the potential of building up a healthy reserve of good *karma*. Either in this life or the next, it would help the subject to progress towards the *Nirwana* (Hadley 2001:155). In some ancient cultures a public show of repentance was not frowned upon, as if someone who did penance was in some way less worthy than other people. Among the Sikhs penance, 'tanakhah', functions as a practical way to restore a person and to make him acceptable to society again. (Hadley 2001:20–21)

Repentance and forgiveness have a relational setting and are relevant in every community where humans live together. These notions were as relevant in ancient India as they were to

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1. The canons of Lateran IV (also all ecumenical councils referred to in this article).

2. *Concilium Lateranense IV.21: Omnis utriusque sexus fidelis postquam ad annos discretionis pervenerit omnia sua solus peccata confiteatur fideliter saltem semel in anno proprio sacerdoti et iniunctam sibi poenitentiam studeat pro viribus adimplere suscipiens reverenter ad minus in pascha eucharistiæ sacramentum nisi forte de consilio proprii sacerdotis ob aliquam rationabilem causam ad tempus ab eius perceptione duxerit abstinendum. Alioquin et vivens ab ingressu Ecclesiæ arceatur et moriens christiana careat sepultura. Unde hoc salutare statutum frequenter in ecclesiis publicetur ne quisquam ignorantiæ cæcitate velamen excusationis assumat. Si quis autem alieno sacerdoti voluerit iusta de causa sua confiteri peccata licentiam prius postulet et obtineat a proprio sacerdote cum aliter ille ipsum non possit solvere vel ligare.*

3. *Concilium Lateranense IV.21: qui peccatum in poenitentiali iudicio sibi detectum præsumpserit revelare non solum a sacerdotali officio deponendum decernimus verum etiam ad agendam perpetuam poenitentiam in arctum monasterium detrudendum.*

the classical Greek and Romans. Aristotle mentions in his *Retorica* that human wrath is discouraged by a meek response (cf. Pr 15:1). He presupposes that repentance and forgiveness only function in contexts where relations are disturbed by bad behaviour, be it by actions or words. For Aristotle, wrath is a response to human behaviour that fails in consideration or respect, or in treating others with contempt (*Retorica* 1380; cf. Konstan 2008:243). Aristotle supposes that in general one is less inclined to be angry if offenders admit that they were wrong and regret their actions (*Retorica* 1380a: καὶ τοῖς ὁμολογοῦσι καὶ μεταμελομένοις). [*And to those who agree that they were wrong and are sorry.*] The philosopher insists that this shared evaluation of events (ὁμολογοῦσι) is paramount, and that those who inflicted pain must be truly sorry (μεταμελομένοις). When those offended observe this attitude in the perpetrators, their wrath will likely fade. Without admission and regret, wrath does not give away and there is no basis for a functional relationship or anything that resembles forgiveness in the Christian sense, that the early church came to appreciate. Aristotle gives an example from the experience of slavery in his day. When slaves are cheeky and deny their obvious guilt, their master will only become angrier, but if they honestly admit their wrongdoing and suffer the penalty, their master's wrath will disappear, and their relations will be normal again.

It should therefore be noticed that Aristotle uses *veritas* as an unspoken compass for activities that concern the restoration of relationships. The acknowledgment of the truth facilitates a common judgement and prepares offenders to suffer the consequences of their actions. With Lucius Annaeus Seneca, one finds a similar approach. Clemency might be bestowed in situations where punishment would not do any good, or if there were mitigating circumstances (*De Clementia* 2.7.1–3). *Mercy* was possible in such circumstances, but forgiveness was out of the question.[4]

This approach to repentance and forgiveness is rather far removed from prevailing Western concepts of the 21st century. 'Today, the idea of forgiveness is understood to entail the voluntary surrender of anger and the desire for retribution precisely when anger is deserved' (Konstan 2008:244). In other words, forgiveness is no longer dependent on a restored relationship on the basis of truth and regret, but often operates as a one-sided decision of a victim to give up anger and resentment, without any indication of sorrow and new behaviour on the part of the offender. Influential segments of contemporary Christianity contribute to this new approach, by teaching that it is one's duty to forgive right, left and centre those who don't want forgiveness (see Braun 2008). As if the judicial murders of Jesus and St Stephen should set the standard for every situation, also when offenders are very much aware of what they are doing, and don't regret their actions at all.

4.*De Clementia* 2.7.3: *Haec omnia non veniae, sed clementiae opera sunt. Clementia liberum arbitrium habet; non sub formula, sed ex aequo et bono iudicat ; et absoluere illi licet et, quanti vult, taxare litem. The young humanist John Calvin repudiated this way of thinking. In his commentary on De Clementia (1532) he writes: Quicquid hic disputat Seneca, uno verbo subuerti potest. Non enim procedit argumentum: remisit poenam meritam, ergo praetermisit quod facere debuit.* ('Whatever Seneca puts forward here, can be blasted away with one word. Because his argument leads to nothing: he has remitted a punishment that was due, so he has neglected what should have been done' (Battles & Hugo 1969:378).

Aristotle clearly had a very different perspective on this, as had the early Church. That is not to say that his classical views agreed with Judeo-Christian views in every respect. His perspective lacked the vertical depth of the early Christians. Horizontally, the most noticeable difference was that his compass of truth gravitates towards a sense of honour. For this reason, it is perfectly acceptable to use personal vengeance as a legitimate tool to overcome anger. Apostolic Christianity had a rather different take on this: no personal revenge, but trusting God for retribution[1] (e.g. Rm 12:19. Put in a more positive way, for the Greek philosopher a hunger for righteousness could also be satisfied by retaliation or retribution. Aristotle uses τιμωρία, as he demands payment or punishment from offenders (*Retorica* 1378a). Anger is relational and so is the solution, so it is necessary that 'the person who is provoked to wrath always directs his anger against specific persons'.[5]

As in ancient Indian thinking, the classical concepts of repentance and forgiveness are aimed at rehabilitation. By means of admission of wrongdoing and by penance, offenders became acceptable again to society and in their own eyes (Kaster 2005:82). This feeling could also take the form of communal regret. One finds this with the Greek historian Polybius, who describes the Roman invasion of Greece in the second century BC. He ascribes the total desolation to the irresponsibility of the Greek leaders and blames their lack of wisdom (*Hist.* 3.39.9). Many Greeks committed suicide, but Polybius also narrates how they started to accuse one another of treason and an anti-Roman attitude, while others met the Romans, confessed their treason and asked them what penance they should perform. Their aim in this was to achieve acceptability in the eyes of the new government and in their own eyes as members of the new society.

Classical thinking on repentance, *paenitentia*, is often focused on the consequences of someone's behaviour. More than once, regret does not concern the action as such, but the adverse consequences. This is a phenomenon of all ages. When Victorian playwright Oscar Wilde received a jail term for committing 'gross indecency' under Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, he wrote a letter from prison, which was published after his death under the title *De Profundis* ('out of the depths', referring to penitential Psalm 130, [LXX] 129). The careful reader, however, will observe that Wilde's remorse is very different from that of the Psalmist. He regrets the consequences for himself and the shame that he imparted to his family, but he does not regret the actions as such, or the betrayal of his wife, Constance Mary Lloyd, whom he had married under strict Anglican vows, only a year earlier. The depths were caused by a backward society and unfair judicial system. The vertical dimension of existential guilt before God is absent from Wilde's ponderings as well.

This is not unlike the Roman politician and essayist Marcus Tullius Cicero. After Cicero fell out of favour and lost his

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5.Aristotle, *Retorica* 1378a: εἰ δὴ τοῦτ' ἐστὶν ἡ ὀργή, ἀνάγκη τὸν ὀργιζόμενον ὀργίζεσθαι ἀεὶ τῶν καθ' ἕκαστόν τινι.

consulship, he blames everyone, including the gods, but not his own behaviour. There was no *peccati infamia* [*loss of legal or social standing through a fault of his*] (*LXV Q FR I*, 3).

Christian repentance and forgiveness, on the other hand, focused on personal wrongdoing. Kaster (2005), writing on Tertullian, marks this as the most important distinction between *paenitentia* [deeds of repentance or penance] in early Christianity and that of pre-Christian Rome:

> For Tertullian, writing on the subject late in the second century of our era, it is *only* what we would call 'remorse' that corresponds to true *paenitentia*, a change of heart that leads one to seek purgation and forgiveness for sins – for offenses, which above all offend against God as the form and source of all good. But, as Tertullian was pleased to point out, with complete accuracy if not perfect charity, that is not the *paenitentia* of pre-Christian Rome. (p. 81)

As the classical world progressed into the Christian era, Christian concepts of personal sorrow were also integrated into Roman law (Kubiak 2016:403).

Repentance and forgiveness in the early Church

There are several aspects that need to be considered in relation to repentance and forgiveness in the early Church. From a later historical perspective, it is tempting to focus on the admission and readmission of baptised sinners to the communion of the Church. Although this is certainly part of the story, such an approach would be rather limited, as it fails to offer a spiritual and historical context. For that reason, it will be helpful to consider related practices and concepts, as well as the narrower practice of repentance and forgiveness in the context of Church discipline:

- The early Christians set aside days and seasons to encourage personal repentance and conversion of life and thinking.
- The Apostolic Church used the book of Psalms as 'the' prayer book provided by the Holy Spirit, both in the liturgy and private devotions. Repentance and forgiveness are recurring themes in these songs. By singing and reciting the Psalms, Christians expressed sorrow over sin and their commitment to a new way of life that was marked by keeping God's commandments. Not only the Psalms, but also the intensive use of Scripture by the Church Fathers in general, encouraged the idea that all human behaviour should be measured against God's standards, as a mutually agreed compass for the evaluation of human thoughts and actions. God's law brought sin to light and provoked repentance as well as the desire for forgiveness (cf. Rm 7:7–9; Gl 3:10).
- Readmission to the Holy Eucharist and Christian fellowship after public repentance.

Seasons of repentance

Setting priorities includes the scheduling of time to do it, otherwise there is no real interest or commitment.

As repentance and conversion were serious issues for the early Church, Christians set aside special seasons as a community to focus on conviction and confession of sin, with a view to acquiring God's forgiveness. The time and length of these seasons varied from region to region but were generally concentrated in the week or weeks before Easter, with a natural focus on the human and personal sin which had necessitated Jesus's suffering and atoning death (2 Cor 5:19). Over time, Good Friday developed into the Day of Atonement for the New Testament Church, blending the spiritual concepts of the Passover liberation from the power of Egypt with the communal cleansing of *Yom Kippur* (Lv 16).

The very early Church lacked a focus on fasting as a ritual. Fasting from food and drink functioned as a means subservient to spiritual goals. The Shepherd of Hermas describes this tellingly (*III Simultude* 5.3). For him the aim is to be on one's guard against wrong words and desires, to fast from wrongdoing as it were. Fasting from food and drink other than water was used to show that one meant business. In the early Church, fasting did not imply total abstention from food, but a restriction to sober meals of water and bread, as Christians focused on contrition and conversion. The 'bread and water punishment', particularly in military discipline, is reminiscent of this, promoting a moral compass and a new way of life.

Hermas recommends that Christians use the money they save on luxury foods as a donation to a widow, an orphan, or someone else in difficult material circumstances. In this way repentance is used positively to encourage a new and healing way of life. Later, St Cyprian would write on this extensively, using the giving of alms pastorally in the restoration process of lapsed Christians (Dunn 2004:735).

In his book on fasting (*De ieiunio adversus psychicos* 3.1–3*)*, Tertullian makes a connection between fasting and the type of sin that Adam and Eve committed in the Garden of Eden, which led to the spiritual fall of mankind. To his mind the stomach deserved some punishment, as all other sins flowed from this initial one. Although Tertullian does not say so, it is a beautiful biblical thought that God uses a meal to reinforce the New covenant and the restoration of humanity in Christ. However, Tertullian was not the person to contemplate food positively, and particularly not by the time he wrote *De Ieiunio*. By then he had become a Montanist and considered the regular Catholic Church as far too lenient in many respects.

As early as the second century, Christians also set aside special days for repentance, perhaps as a weekly occurrence, but certainly in the period leading up to Easter. Both Tertullian and the Didache indicate that believers fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays (*Didache* 8.1, *Tert. De Ieiunio c.* 14), commemorating the betrayal and suffering of Christ. This agreed well with the weekly cycle of celebrating the resurrection on Sunday. However, it is clear there wasn't a uniform practice, and what the Didache in its present format writes on this topic may be based on Tertullian. Irenaeus proves that this practice of

fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays was not uniform at all. This is evident from what he mentions in relation to Sunday and the resurrection. In his view, the mystery of the resurrection should *only be celebrated on the Lord's Day*, ἐν μόνῃ τῇ τῆς κυριακῆς ἡμέρᾳ (Eusebius 1932, *H.E.* 5.24.12). Irenaeus asked that this view should at least be respected. From the way he supports his argument, it is clear: practices of fasting and preparation differed from place to place. Eusebius (1932) argues:

> Because the disagreement does not only consider the day, but also the form that the fasting should take. Some think that one day of fasting is in order, others two and again others more; some even reckon their day as forty hours of the day as well as night. (*H.E.* 5.24.12)[6]

The Didache not only connects fasting to the preparation for the Lord's Day and the resurrection as God's seal on the destruction of the age-old curse on human sin, but also to preparation for Holy Baptism. In relation to the Didache the *caveat* that it does not have a strong manuscript tradition in its present form, should apply. Early Fathers do not cite from the Didache with reference to this document. If it really was a commonly accepted summary of Apostolic teaching and practice, one would have expected this. Eusebius (1932, *H.E.* 3.25.4) and Athanasius (*Ep. Fest.* 39) do refer to a 'Didache', but whether this is the same document we know under that title today, is questionable. Today's Didache has a late manuscript tradition, which could well be a reconstruction based on other materials, like the Letter of Barnabas, Tertullian and later Church codes (Lake 1977:305–307). The present text, however, makes fasting compulsory for both the person receiving baptism and the minister who officiates:

> 7.4 And before the baptism, let them fast, both the baptizer as the one who is baptized, as well as others who are able, but command the person who is to be baptized to fast for one or two days.

On the weekly fast, the Didache says:

> 8.1 And don't let your fasting coincide with that of the hypocrites, because they fast on the second (Monday) and fifth (Thursday) after the Sabbath. You, however, must fast on the fourth (Wednesday) and preparation (Friday).[7]

This injunction impresses as legalistic and anti-Jewish, as if hypocrisy is defined by the day on which fasting takes place, instead of by a person's attitude and intent! It seems that the author of the present text of the Didache was not troubled by exegetical considerations when he alludes to Jesus's words on relating to fasting in the Gospels. According to the Didache author or redactor, hypocrisy is prevented by reciting the Lord's Prayer three times a day (8.2 τρὶς τῆς ἡμέρας οὕτω προσεύχεσθε), and if one takes care to fast on two other days than the Jews do. This breathes a completely different spirit

than the Gospels and Jesus's words taken in context. When Jesus addresses prayer and fasting (e.g. in the Sermon on the Mount, Mt 6), sincerity before God is paramount. Christ specifically rejects public display and a repetition of words, but for the Didache these very things constitute the right approach: repetition of words and observance of fasting days that are seen to be different from the days that the Jews keep. There is an obvious discrepancy between the Didache, and the form of Apostolic Christianity handed down to us through the Gospels.

This agrees well with later phases in the development of Christianity. By the time of the Council of Nicaea (AD 325), keeping up appearances had become an integral part of church life. For instance, the council expressly forbade deacons to sit with priests when a congregation met for worship. According to the fathers of Nicaea, deacons have a lower rank and publicly sitting with priests was hardly suitable for them. 'One is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren' (Mt 23:8) had become merely an echo from an earlier epoch.

This emphasis on appearance in the fourth century also emerges in the personal correspondence of Athanasius (c. 296–373). While his public festal letters (in his exhortation to his flock to keep the fast) do not display a competitive spirit, his private correspondence with his Egyptian colleague, Serapion (*Ad Serapionem, inter epistulae festalis* xi–xiii),[8] breathes a different spirit. Athanasius suggests a compulsory 40-day fast for the believers in Alexandria, or maybe, asks Serapion, to implement an earlier decision to that effect (Gwynn 2012:141–142). Biblical or spiritual arguments are absent in this letter. Christians in Egypt must have a longer fast too, because otherwise they will literally end up as 'the laughingstock' for other churches in the Roman Empire.

Alexandrian Christians should take care to make a pious and strict impression, competing with the most austere forms of orthodoxy available. It is perhaps significant that this letter is written from Rome, and that Athanasius conveys the impression that Christians there and elsewhere practised (verb form, UK spelling) a longer pre-Easter fast than customary in Egypt at the time. Most likely, the Church of Rome at the time 'only' fasted for a period of three weeks prior to Easter (cf. Socrates *H.E.* 5.22), so the competition was on. With nearly double the amount of days for contrition and penance, Alexandria would be a leading light. What the Master had solemnly warned against three centuries earlier (e.g. Mt 6:1), being concerned with public appearances, was now preached as a justification for a new standard for orthodox fasting by one of the most conservative bishops of the fourth century.

On the other hand, the period of 40 days was popular at the time, and Athanasius's suggestion had support in biblical

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6.Eusebius (1932), *H.E. 5.24.12*: γὰρ μόνον περὶ τῆς ἡμέρας ἐστὶν ἡ ἀμφισβήτησις, ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ τοῦ εἴδους αὐτοῦ τῆς νηστείας. οἱ μὲν γὰρ οἴονται μίαν ἡμέραν δεῖν αὐτοὺς νηστεύειν, οἱ δὲ δύο, οἱ δὲ καὶ πλείονας· οἱ δὲ τεσσαράκοντα ὥρας ἡμερινάς τε καὶ νυκτερινὰς συμμετροῦσιν τὴν ἡμέραν αὐτῶν. These 40 hours may have been inspired by spiritual symbolism: the 40 days of Jesus's temptation in the desert and the wandering years of the people of Israel before they were admitted in the Promised Land.

7.*Didache 8.1*: Αἱ δὲ νηστεῖαι ὑμῶν μὴ ἔστωσαν μετὰ τῶν ὑποκριτῶν. νηστεύουσι γὰρ δευτέρᾳ σαββάτων καὶ πέμπτῃ· ὑμεῖς δὲ νηστεύσατε τετράδα καὶ παρασκευήν.

8.This letter is only extant in Syriac and was translated in English by Parker (1865, *The festal epistles of S. Athanasius*, London, Rivington) and later by A. Robertson (PNF).

symbolism. Peter of Alexandria required 40 days of repentance for lapsed Christians before they could be readmitted to the Eucharist. Hippolytus suggested a period of 40 days for cleansing if candidates presented themselves for Holy Baptism; and the *Canones* of Athanasius prescribed 40 days of penance for adulterers and public executioners who desired to be readmitted to the Lord's Supper (Russo 2013:23). There was a biblical precedent for this period as well. Didn't the Lord Jesus fast in the desert for 40 days before he started his public ministry (Mt 4:2)?[9] Didn't Moses observe a similar period before he received the Law on Mount Sinai (Ex 34:28; Dt 9:9)? Similar things could be said about Elijah after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Ki 19:7–8), and the response of the Ninevites to Jonah's preaching that in 40 days their city would be destroyed (Jnh 3:4).

By the time of Leo the Great (c. 461), the observance of a period of 40 days as Lent had become widespread, if not the rule. However, his *De Quadragesima* sermons ('on the fortieth day before Easter') seem relatively unconcerned with keeping up appearances and emphasise the spiritual purpose of fasting in relation to genuine repentance and a new course of life. Leo the Great reflects several of the aspects of μετάνοια in a way similar to Matthew, Luke and Paul:

> However, because the right exercise of self-discipline is not merely discipline of the flesh, but much more a cleansing of the mind, we wish that your observance will be so perfect that as you cut off enjoyment that belongs to carnal desires, you will likewise banish errors that emerge from sentiments of the soul. Because he whose heart is not polluted by unbelief, prepares himself with real and mental cleansing for the Paschal feast, on which all the spiritual sacraments of our religion coincide. Because, as the Apostle says: 'Everything that is not from faith is sin'. (Rm 14:23)[10]

Leo the Great is concerned with a repentance that includes a reformation of thought and a changed way of life. For him both are the result of faith, a focus of trust in God. In the *Quadragesima sermones* this is not mere theory, but repentance requires a converted way of life, which includes a changed attitude towards one's neighbour:

> Having put our trust in such great promises (see Col 3:1–4), dearly beloved, be heavenly minded, not in your spiritual expectation only, but also in your walk of life. And although at all times purity of mind and body should be our goal, particularly now in these forty days of fasting, you must take care to let your piety act out in works, not only in the distribution of alms, which are a good way to indicate spiritual improvement, but also in forgiving trespasses and being merciful towards them that are accused of wrongdoing; so that God's requirement relating to people would not obstruct your prayers. Because if we agree with the teachings of the Lord: Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors (Matt. 6:12), we want to fulfil with our whole heart

what we speak. Because only then shall happen to us what we ask in the following request: that we are not led into temptation and delivered from all evil: through our Lord Jesus Christ, who together with the Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, world without end. Amen

Scripture and prayer

While the previous section on fasting and seasons of repentance focused on the early Church setting aside periods for this as to priority, it is also important to develop an understanding for how these Christians reached out to God. What did they pray, and what was the standard for the evaluation of their behaviour, and motivated them to do penance?

Perhaps the single most important feature of the liturgical and private devotional life of early Christians in relation to repentance, is the book of Psalms. The Fathers considered this as the Holy Spirit's Psaltery, which provided words to reach out to God, also in situations where the believer couldn't find any himself. In the Psalms, human behaviour is measured against the standards of God's law, which encourages self-reflection and evaluation.

The seven penitential Psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143; LXX: 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, and 142) were particularly appropriate for this. These songs centre on personal confession of sin, contriteness of heart and seeking forgiveness in the presence of God. Throughout the history of the church these Psalms would prove indispensable in theological reflection on repentance and forgiveness. In the Middle-Ages it was from these seven penitential psalms that the church derived the seven deadly sins (Waltke, Houston & Moore 2010:580): Psalm 6 against unjustified wrath (*ira*), Psalm 32 against arrogance (*superbia*), Psalm 38 against gluttony and excess (*gula*), Psalm 51 against lust (*luxuria*), Psalm 102 against greed (*avaritia*), Psalm 130 against envy (*invidia*) and Psalm 143 against sloth (*acedia*).

In the Psalms, repentance and fasting coincide with the believer reaching out to God in prayer and supplication. The early Church used fasting and sorrow as vehicles or means, not as goals in themselves, but as ways to support their reaching out to God and to their neighbour. With the money that was saved by fasting, the believers reached out to their fellow humans, and with the words of the Psalms they approached the Lord. As the prayer book of the Israel of God, they would also leave an imprint on the regular liturgy and life of the monasteries alike. Using the words of the Holy Spirit, while seeking God's forgiveness and restoration, Christians gave voice to their personal admission of guilt and feelings of repentance and sorrow. Important to consider, is that previous centuries, including the epoch of the early Church, also knew communal expressions of repentance, something that our society has almost lost completely (Waltke, Houston & Moore 2014:2).

Despite the lack of availability of printed Bibles, early Christian experience was shaped by the Scriptures in an

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9.Athanasius did himself not use the episode of Jesus in the desert to argue his case for a 40-day fast but preferred to use Old Testament saints as examples (Brakke 1995:188).

10.*Sermo XLVI De Quadragesima VIII, cap.1: Sed quia utilitas continentiae non solum carnis castigationi, verum etiam mentis necessaria est puritati, observantiam vestram sic cupimus esse perfectam, ut sicut a desideriis carnis reciditis voluptate, ita ab animi sensibus excludatis errores. Nam paschali festo, in quo omnia religionis nostrae sacramenta concurrunt, is vera et rationabili purificatione se praeparat, cujus cor nulla infidelitate polluitur. Dicente enim Apostolo: Omne quod non est ex fide, peccatum est* (Rom. XIV, 23)

extraordinary way. Some early patristic letters are literally compilations of Scripture quotations (Zuiddam 2015). While the Psalms feature prominently in prominent Fathers like Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus, it is not only in these that the Word of God inspired souls to self-reflection and repentance. Other songs breathe a similar spirit, like Hannah's song (1 Sm 2:1–10), Daniel's prayer (9:4–19), Zacharias 'Benedictus' (Lk 1:68–79), Mariam's 'Magnificat' (Lk 1:46–55) and Simeon's 'Nunc dimittis' (Lk 2:29–32).

All these prayers are reflective of a world that is far removed from 21st century experience. Mary's song is – both in vocabulary and spiritual thought – a spontaneous expression of a Jewish girl. Two thousand years later, however, these words reflect a theological content and phraseology immersed in Holy Scripture, that is far beyond today's teenager and most adults. The early Church, on the other hand, lived and breathed biblical vocabulary and contents in personal recital and public prayers. In this way, the mirror of God's Word stimulated believers to repentance and spiritual restoration.

Repentance and excommunication

The early Church provided regular opportunities for reflection by means of special days and periods of fasting, as well as weekly and daily reflections on Scripture and biblical prayer, all stimuli for repentance and conversion of life. The Shepherd of Hermas (c. 150) shows that this starts with the individual expressing sorrow and asking forgiveness as part of an ongoing relationship with God. This book points to the crucial role of faith as the power of God, to overcome sin and to experience answered prayers for spiritual improvement (*Man ix.* 10–11).

The Shepherd of Hermas also addresses the question of how to get a merciful God, if one has trespassed after the cleansing of sin in Holy Baptism (*Mand.Iv.ii.* 3–4). He suggests that this is possible through repentance, as Christ opens and closes the kingdom of heaven. However, if one continues to commit the same sin, repentance becomes shallow and sorrow loses its moral strength. Other Fathers like Clement of Alexandria preserved similar sentiments (*Stromata* 2.13). Lapsed Christians may approach God, not for cheap solutions, but with heartfelt prayer, honest confession of sins and a changed life. Someone who keeps repenting of the same sin, which he continues to commit, does not differ much from unbelievers, except that, in Clement's view, he may be more conscious of his sin. The combination of purposeful sinning and continued asking for forgiveness, has for Clement no place in genuine Christianity.

Although these sentiments were shared by many, others like Tertullian (as well as movements like the Montanists and Donatists), disliked the idea of 'cheap grace' and continued to question whether there is still forgiveness with God if a baptised Christian commits grave sins. Perhaps it was possible for king David to get away with murder and adultery in Old Testament days, but there was a profound sense that this was not acceptable in the New Testament era after

Pentecost. It only took a white lie to seal the verdict of the death penalty for Ananias and Sapphira (Ac 5:1–11).

This leads to the consideration of repentance and forgiveness in the context of excommunication. The possibility of and requirements for readmission of repentant sinners into the church, is a recurring theme in patristic literature.

Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 1.13.5) describes an episode in France when quite a few women became enchanted by the prophet Marcus, who also practised magic and brewed love potions. Several sisters in the faith fell for his charms and tricks. Irenaeus mentions how a deacon admitted Marcus into his home and how the 'prophet' abused this hospitality by running away with the deacon's wife, who was a stunning beauty.[11] After the brethren in the congregation went to great length convincing her to come back, she publicly confessed her sin by weeping and display of regret. She wanted everyone to know that she distanced herself from her former actions and from the spiritual and bodily pollution by this magician.[12]

In this story, Christian repentance is combined with the way in which classical society expressed sorrow and regret. Irenaeus's tale shares several similarities with Homer's *Helen of Troy*. Irenaeus calls the deacon's wife, who is not mentioned by name, a *speciosa,* an impressive beauty. Helen, daughter of Zeus, shared these qualities. The stories also agree in the public rejection of their former actions and in ascribing these to someone else tempting and ensnaring them. Helen regards herself as a victim of Aphrodite. When Odysseus slew the Trojans with his long bronze sword:

> the other Trojan women cried with sorrow, but my heart rejoiced, because my heart was already set to return home, in hindsight regretting the blindness of the senses which Aphrodite had caused, when she pushed me to that place, away from the land of my fathers, turning my back on my own child, bridal chamber and also my husband, who lacked nothing in intellect or looks.[13]

The deacon's spouse, similarly, refers to Marcus as the cause of her troubles: 'the pollution which happened through this magician'. Both women went through a period when they were in the power of – yes, their will was taken over by – someone else. This no longer being the case, they do not leave any misunderstanding that they distance themselves from that past and fully reject everything associated with this period. Readmittance in classical society happened along these lines. Even a queen like Helena may openly share this with an unknown guest at court (Telemachus), without harming her position or standing. On the contrary, the common denominator among penitents from every part of

11.*Adv. Haer.* 1.13.5: ut et diaconus quidam eorum qui sunt in Asia nostri, suscipiens eum in domum suam, inciderit in hujusmodi calamitatem. Nam cum esset uxor ejus speciosa, et sententia et corpore corrupta est a mago isto, et secuta eum esset multo tempore (Harvey 2013:121–122).

12.*Adv. Haer.* 1.13.5: post deinde cum magno labore fratres eam convertissent, omne tempus in exhomologesi consummavit, plangens et lamentans ob hanc, quam passa est ab hoc mago, corruptelam (Harvey 2013:122).

13.*Odyssee 4,* r.159–164: ἔνθ᾽ ἄλλαι Τρῳαὶ λίγ᾽ ἐκώκυον: αὐτὰρ ἐμὸν κῆρ χαῖρ᾽, ἐπεὶ ἤδη μοι κραδίη τέτραπτο νέεσθαι ἂψ οἶκόνδ᾽, ἄτην δὲ μετέστενον, ἣν Ἀφροδίτη δῶχ᾽, ὅτε μ᾽ ἤγαγε κεῖσε φίλης ἀπὸ πατρίδος αἴης, παῖδά τ᾽ ἐμὴν νοσφισσαμένην θάλαμόν τε πόσιν τε οὔ τευ δευόμενον, οὔτ᾽ ἂρ φρένας οὔτε τι εἶδος.

society, was that one admitted guilt and changed one's life – and that society was made aware of this.

With Irenaeus's story one sees an integration of classical and Christian concepts. Repentance and forgiveness took on forms that were customary in antiquity. Unsurprisingly, a public admission of error and agreement on a desirable new course, brings people together again. As unity 'in truth,' this functions as a natural theology or revelation, an echo of the patterns and ideals intended by the original Creator of humankind, even in a pagan society.

Irenaeus does not make mention of a formal public moment in congregational life when the woman in question confesses her sins and is readmitted to Holy Communion. The Church Father literally says that the brothers converted her from the error of her way. With this apparently, she was automatically part of the Church again. However, in her everyday life she took care to show that she regretted her former behaviour. This public character of her admission of guilt, and subsequent conversion, made additional ceremonies superfluous, even if the Church had these at the time. Still the public character of her repentance is essential for Irenaeus. For this the Church Father has pastoral reasons, which he describes in *Adversus Haereses*.

Irenaeus distinguishes among three categories of lapsed Christians (*Adv. Haer.* 1.13.7). Firstly, people who sear their conscience (cf. 2 Tm 3:6); then others, who repent and publicly confess their sins (cf. Ac 19:18–20);[14] and thirdly, people who are kept back from doing so by shame. As a result of this shame, the last group ends up between a rock and a hard place. Irenaeus accuses them of being more ashamed of public confession than of the sins they have committed. Effectually, they prefer the perdition of their soul to public embarrassment in the eyes of men (cf. Lk 12:5). Irenaeus reasons that this leads to a state of spiritual despair in some, while others cannot be bothered with public penance and become apostates. If there is no option to return, they might as well go all the way. Irenaeus affirms the general view that reconciliation with Christ and his Church is possible. This, however, requires repentance, public confession and a new way of life.

Tertullian probably is the first early Christian writer who orders his thinking on repentance systematically. As would be the case with Cyprian later, in Tertullian's reflections readmission to the Christian community plays a central role. Holy Baptism is the door to the church, but once a person has entered, but lapsed, it is impossible to repeat this and reopen the door by a second baptism. While this door is closed to lapsed Christians, God provided a different one for Christian sinners: the way of repentance and conversion, a lifeboat for shipwrecked believers (Joyce 1941:22).

Traditionally two phases are recognised in Tertullian's views on repentance and forgiveness: a Catholic and a Montanist

one. His initial way of thinking is evident in *De Paenitentia*. Repentance is regarded as personal contriteness of heart and conversion of life, in the biblical sense of μετανοέω, not as submitting to deeds of penance ordered by a priest.[15] Tertullian does not use the word *priest* once in his treatise on *paenitentia*.

Repentance is especially required, because God commands Christians to repent from their sin (*De Paen. cap.* 4). Tertullian recommends a daily conversion to every Christian (*De Paen. cap.* 6). Believers should come to love what God loves and hate what he despises. In this way, Christians will look at their life from a divine perspective. His treatise makes it quite clear that *paenitentia* is a conversion of life rather than penance, to make up for a transgression. Tertullian, despite being a lawyer, totally lacks a legalistic approach to this topic. Who postpones Holy Baptism to be able to sin a little while longer, before everything is wiped away by the water of conversion, has to Tertullian's mind, not even started to comprehend what Christianity is about. Without the presence of genuine repentance, nothing is forgiven because repentance and conversion is the price that God sets on the reception of forgiveness.[16] As with the deacon's wife in Irenaeus, *paenitentia* coincides with a rejection of the past and embracing a new way of life. Likewise, the classical understanding of repentance guarantees that *paenitentia* includes a public change of behaviour and thinking.

In *De Paenitentia,* Tertullian deems it still possible that lapsed believers can return to the Christian community on the same basis. The fact that he defines baptism as 'first conversion' and repentance as a second conversion that is only effective once (Moreschini & Norelli 2005:342), does not necessarily imply that believers only received one chance to sin after their conversion. Although the early Fathers, including Hermas, have been interpreted in this restrictive way (e.g. Rahner 2007:97), this is probably not the correct interpretation for an early context. For Tertullian, in textual context, these are rather two spiritual phases with distinct requirements and solutions. Holy Baptism was an effective overall cleansing from the sins committed in one's pagan past, and *paenitentia* was repentance for specific sins afterwards. This perfectly explains Tertullian's statement why *paenitentia* is only effective once. If someone commits another, or the same sin, at some later stage, this is not covered by the first penance, but repentance and conversion are required anew.

This interpretation is vindicated by Apostolic teaching (e.g. 1 Jn 1:7–10), as well as Tertullian's additional thoughts on the subject. He writes that a Christian sinner should be ashamed indeed for entering into trespass and spiritual danger. However, the believer should not be ashamed at all for the

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14. Notably, the public confession described in Acts 19:18–20, which includes book burning, is characterised as an activity of the Word of God: 'In this way the Word of the Lord grew with might and took over' (Ac 19:20).

15. While by early modern times *paenitentia* was generally interpreted as penance, this was not yet the case with Tertullian, and most likely also not with Jerome. Despite Erasmus's demonstrations to the contrary, within the classical context, the Vulgate was not wrong to translate μετάνοια with *paenitentia* (cf. Liddell & Scott 1996:1115).

16. *De Peanitentia 6.4*: *Hoc enim pretio dominus veniam addicere instituit, hac paenitentiae conpensatione redimendam proponit inpunitatem* (Tertullian 1957:153).

fact that he needs liberation again, because someone who falls ill again, the Church Father reasons, also needs to take medicine again. Tertullian even states that one's gratitude is expressed to the Lord by not rejecting what he offers anew. 'You have trespassed, but can also now be reconciled'.[17] The imagery of sickness as a phenomenon which happens to most people on a regular basis, indicates that the author of *De Paenitentia* is not a rigid legalist who condemns Christians to everlasting hell on their second failure to live up to the demands of the Master.

A far stricter approach is evident from Tertullian's later work, *De Pudicitia* [On virtue]. As a Montanist, the author insists that there are some sins which may only be forgiven after lifelong penance or martyrdom. These include adultery, incest, idolatry, denial of Christ and murder. The Catholic Church had become far too lenient to Tertullian's mind, allowing any sinner to return eventually. Baptised Christians who had committed these sins, should not count on any forgiveness, at least not in this life. Tertullian reasoned that the church should not give the impression of the contrary by readmitting offenders of these categories. In principle, sins like those could only be atoned for by lifelong penance. Offenders could still be saved, like the criminal on the cross (Lk 23:43), but on earth it could never be business as usual. The practice of Catholic bishops, who readmitted sinners like that on the basis of the approval of martyrs, shows, according to Tertullian, that everyone concerned, realised at a deeper level that such crimes could only be wiped out by showing contriteness until the day of one's death:

> Indeed, when you seek forgiveness for adulterers and fornicators with a martyr, you admit yourself that such sins may only be resolved by their own martyrdom, you who suppose that this is possible by that of someone else.[18]

It should perhaps be mentioned that Tertullian's words do not consider the departed saints in heaven of medieval theology, but the invocation of still living martyrs on earth, who suffered and testified to their faith in times of persecution. St Cyprian speaks about martyrs in a similar way, as believers who suffered for Christ. These martyrs could still be alive, suffering in jail or penitential labour, like many Christians in North Africa who were condemned to work in the mines. The church considered such people martyrs and provided them with food (cf. McGowan 2003:455–476). This practice of consulting living martyrs is the early beginning of the development of the doctrine of works of supererogation, which would lay the basis for the later teachings on indulgences, which would in their turn provoke the Protestant Reformation of 1517. On close inspection, many topics in the history of the Church share a connection with repentance and forgiveness, as reconciliation with God concerns the heart of Christianity.

Cyprian, like Tertullian, did not support this idea of supererogation by martyrs as a spiritual right (*De Lapsis* 17). He cautions against self-deception by trusting in the intercession of others as a basis for forgiveness, as sin is in the first place committed against God. Therefore, only God can forgive sins. Cyprian allows that God may consider what faithful witnesses or priests ask regarding the offender, but this is in no way a right that believers may count upon (*De Lapsis* 36). Cyprian argues that servants cannot sign away debts with their Master for clients because of their own good deeds and moral credit. Those contributions are minuscule in comparison with the offence against God anyway, so passing these on as an indulgence for the benefit of others, is a futile attempt. Lapsed Christians need to take personal responsibility and themselves cry out for mercy to the Lord. Even martyrs are bound by the Law of God and his will (*De Lapsis* 18). *Maledictus homo qui spem habet in hominem,* 'cursed is the man who puts his hope on a human person', are the parting words of the African bishop on the subject (see Jr 17:5).

For Cyprian, faith is much more than agreement or acknowledgement of historical events. It includes sorrowful awareness of sin, and an expectancy which reaches out to God in prayer, and to one's neighbour with a converted way of life. Where those are present, God's readiness to forgive should not be doubted. If the church denies this spiritual reality, for example in the case of agonising grief over an abortion, apart from being a form of false witness, this has the potential to do great spiritual damage (McAreavey 1993:235).

Final observations

While the practice of repentance and forgiveness was embedded in similar concepts in classical culture, early Christianity added a profound and personal vertical dimension to these concepts.

In this way, the church paved the way for repentance as an integrated way of life. This was encouraged by setting aside special days and seasons for believers to devote to confession of sins, repentance and conversion. A central role in this regard was played by the Holy Scriptures, particularly the penitential Psalms.

As a rule, the early Church forgave and readmitted repentant sinners. It should be noted that when repentance and conversion where obvious, readmission was not a matter of years either, and granted liberally. St Cyprian testifies to this as he concludes his treatise on lapsed Christians (*De Lapsis* 36):

> If someone makes things right with God in this way: if he repents from his ways, if he is ashamed of his sins, then will he receive even more strength and faith from the pain of his very fall; heard and assisted by God, he shall make glad the congregation whom he disappointed not that long ago; and not only will he be surprised by God's forgiveness, but even with a crown.[19]

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17. *De Paenitentia* 7.13–14: *Pudeat iterum periclitari, sed [non] iterum liberari neminem pudeat: iterandae valitudinis iteranda medicina est. [14] Gratus in dominum extiteris, si quod tibi denuo offert, non recusaveris. Offendisti sed reconciliari adhuc potes* (Tertullian 1957:160).

18. *De Pudicitia* 23.9: *Cum tamen moechis et fornicatoribus a martyre expostulas veniam, ipse confiteris eiusmodi crimina nonnisi proprio martyrio diluenda, qui praesumis alieno. Quod sciam, et martyrium aliud erit baptisma.*

19. *De Lapsis* 36: *Quisic Deo satisfecerit, qui paenitentia facti sui, qui pudore delicti plus et virtutis et fidei de ipso lapsus sui dolore conceperit, exauditus et adiutus a Domino, quam contristauerat nuper laetam faciet ecclesiam nec solam iam Dei veniam merebitur sed coronam.*

Mere forgiveness is not all that a repentant sinner may hope for. The consequences of a lapse may even lead to heavenly rewards.

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