

Anselm, Lateran IV, and Aquinas: A Trajectory of Confession and Penance in the Middle Ages

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Between the Gregorian reforms of the late 11th century and the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, the sacrament of penance underwent great changes in practice and theology. According to Thomas Aquinas, by definition a sacrament is a “sacred secret,” a somewhat mysterious ritual involving both physical and spiritual dimensions which the Church practices but does not fully understand;¹ individualized penance, with the ritual occurring between a single priest and penitent, epitomizes the secrecy of sacrament, as the experience will never be repeated nor be able to be shared with another. Naturally, the secrecy surrounding penitential practices and discourse complicates academic endeavors to understand nature of penance as a medieval sacrament. Penitential manuals, unlike preaching manuals and other sacramental manuals that act as “scripts” to the past, cannot reveal information about the specifics of penitential practice, since the rituals and requirements of penance necessitated personalized adjustment to the penitent’s abilities and needs.² Scholars have utilized diverse resources to shed light on penitential practices, to varying degrees of success. Examining the works of two theologians representative of these periods – Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas, whose respective theologies circulated through their students’ teaching and the penitential and preaching manuals of their periods – and placing their works in context exposes the trajectory of the medieval sacrament of penance. Anselm of Canterbury, alive during the Gregorian reforms and writing his *Cur Deus Homo* after the papacy of the moralizing Gregory VII, subsumes his ideas regarding penance into his novel atonement theory. Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, openly discusses the sacrament of penance in his *Summa Theologiae*, a work written after the Fourth Lateran Council and influenced by its canons, including the *Omnis utriusque sexus* decree requiring annual confession. The debate posed here between their contrasting positions, switching entire

¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* vol. 56, 7.

² Murray, “Counselling,” 66.

theologies of sanctification through reinterpretation of internal and external features of penitential attitudes, reveals the issues at stake in the highly ritualized sacrament of penance.

Although one might argue that the intellectual writings of prominent theologians tell us little about the actual practice of penance, we must also remember that both Anselm and Aquinas, in addition to writing theological texts, were teachers and pastoral figures (Anselm as an archbishop and Aquinas as a Dominican friar). Their positions required interaction with the laity, as teachers and as God's shepherds. Therefore, they disseminated their ideas to the populace via pastoral care³ and preaching, both in their own works and in the education of their students. Their primary intellectual works which I will examine here, *Cur Deus Homo* and the *Summa Theologiae*, respectively, are founded upon pastoral concerns reflecting the practices and concerns of their time.⁴ Leonard Boyle, in fact, has argued that Aquinas wrote the *Summa Theologiae* as a pastoral aid for his Dominican brothers, an order that, like other friars, lived *in imitatio Christi* through poverty and preaching to the laity.⁵ Thus, even in "university theology" such as Aquinas', the primary goal is pastoral care, locating "interconnections of areas of study and action in the penitential system" and disseminating them "from the theology faculty to individual confession in the parish church."⁶ Even heavily intellectual writings hold value for pastoral care, as the authors trained their pupils for work in the parish community. Penitential manuals and compositions specifically for the parish priest or the layman took their theology from the pastoral elements of the theologian intellectual, whose sought, as theologians do to this day, to fit doctrine to the circumstances and needs of an ever-changing world.

³ Pastoral care, the counseling priests offered to the laity and the community regarding the practice of religion in daily life and taxing situations, formed a key component of any ecclesiastical figure who interacted with the lay people.

⁴ Mansfield, *Humiliation*, 15.

⁵ Biller, "Confession," 26; Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 34.

⁶ Biller, "Confession," 26.

The Gregorian Reforms and Anselm of Canterbury: Intensifying Contrition

The practice of penance began long before the 11th century, but the Gregorian reforms' emphasis on the contrition of one's heart for the efficacious performance of penance marks a suitable beginning for examining the changes in confession and penance prior to the Fourth Lateran Council. Contrition, in a Christian perspective, is a crushing remorse felt for sins committed, resulting in an inward turning of the heart away from sin, which is the defiance of God's commands. As this paper will explore, the role of contrition changed throughout the history of penance. Prior to the Gregorian movement, penance referred primarily to the public humiliation performed only once in a lifetime. This type of penance wrecked the human body and spirit, but, in medieval thought, it reconciled a Christian to God and to the community so long as the believer committed no further sins between the completion of his penance and his death.⁷ In the 11th century, Pope Gregory VII called for a moral reformation of the church and society; to this end, he refocused the official discourse on penance onto the inward contrition of the heart rather than the external ascetic actions of penance.⁸ Nevertheless, external actions illustrated this inward contrition, from the tears wept during confession to the fasting, almsgiving, and ascetic behaviors that began to make retribution for the offenses committed against God.⁹¹⁰ Dissimilar to the practice in earlier centuries, confessors in the 11th century were encouraged to consider the penitent's contrition and circumstances in assigning penance.¹¹ Gregory VII's focus on true and false penance (the presence or lack of genuine contrition,

⁷ Vauchez, *Laity*, 8.

⁸ Cowdrey, *Pope Gregory VII*, 695-696.

⁹ Hamilton, "Penance," 56, 62-63.

¹⁰ "Works-righteousness", the idea that men could earn their salvation through deeds committed on earth, eventually led, amongst other factors, to the Protestant Reformation. In the context of penance, outward acts were associated with the inner contrition. Like contrition, the role and intensity of penitential works changed based on context and reigning theology.

¹¹ Hamilton, "Penance," 67.

respectively) were intended to return society to true penance, correcting past wrongs and reconciling society to God and to each other.^{12 13} He, like others within the ecclesiastical system, thought of people and their motives idealistically instead of realistically, expecting behavioral perfection from the populace rather than accounting for circumstances influencing human actions.¹⁴ Thus, he believed his moral reforms would restore the community, for people would naturally want to obey the commandments of God above all else. Perhaps such a rosy outlook could be forgiven by the developments in agriculture, trade, and population growth that characterized his world, creating a positive, idealistic environment¹⁵ in which Gregory may have believed human circumstances would not preclude a person from conforming to his moralistic reforms; or, more likely, his ignorance of human nature stemmed from the isolation of those within the institutional ecclesiastical structure.

Anselm of Canterbury's writings fall within this context of penitential reform and monastic theology. One of the last great monastic theologians before the rise of scholasticism (a theological movement characterized with utilizing reason and philosophical logic, especially the philosophy of Aristotle, to explain tenets of Christian faith¹⁶) and considered by many to be a

¹² Hamilton, "Penance," 73.

¹³ The social nature of sin characterized the prior centuries, in which public penance was performed once in a lifetime to atone for all sins committed between baptism and that point in time (Vauchez, *Laity*, 8). Sin affected the entire community; the severity of a sin was closely linked with its harm to society in Gregorian thought (Hamilton, "Penance," 68) and therefore confession and penance offered reconciliation both to the society as a whole and to God (Campbell, "Theologies of Reconciliation," 84). The Gregorian reforms and Fourth Lateran Council's commandments that the laity confess to a priest rather than directly to God considered this social aspect of sin and rectified its consequences through assigning penance in kind (Price, "Informal Penance," 35). Yet the confession to a priest alone, coupled with the secrecy of penitential actions rather than the public displays of prior centuries, also unintentionally harmed the laity, for without the communal nature of sin and reconciliation, the proclamation of absolution fell upon less certain hearts (Price, "Informal Penance," 38). While Anselm still recognized the social nature of sin's consequences, finding the societal honor of his world in the doctrine of the Trinity (Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, 103), by the time of Aquinas public and private sin were differentiated, with public sin indicating a worse intentionality of the sinner because of the harm the sin caused to the community as a whole (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* vol. 60, 27).

¹⁴ Cowdrey, *Pope Gregory VII*, 696.

¹⁵ Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 18.

¹⁶ Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 93-94.

forerunner of the scholastic movement,¹⁷ Anselm's writings combine "extreme fervour of expression, systematic completeness, [and] practical restraint."¹⁸ Intensifying the emotional aspect of Christian life, Anselm argued that one must feel the depths of unworthiness and sin within his own soul before reconciliation to God could begin. The life of a Christian, according to Anselm, must be one of perpetual self-horror and contrition for sin.¹⁹ Although such attitudes, in our modern view, might drive a sinner to despair more often than lead him to salvation, Anselm's intended his focus on contrition pastorally. To live a life of penance and introspection, Anselm believed, destroyed man's sinful will²⁰ and freed it through surrender to God's will; the man would always follow the will of God as a grateful creature serving the Creator, thereby saving the soul.²¹ Alongside the Gregorian reform's refocusing on intentionality in sin and confession, Anselm's writings deviated from the traditional and historic theology of the devil's rights over mankind, emphasizing instead the freedom and responsibility of the will.²²

Anselm's world centered on the cloister. Initially drawn forth unwillingly from its safe recesses into the political and pastoral world as archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm nonetheless threw himself into shepherding the church to which he had been called, in addition to aiding the monastic community that shaped him.²³ Isolated from contemporary issues both by his choice of archbishop's household and his lack of interest in worldly affairs, Anselm "challenged the normal assumptions of the world and gave his attention to eternal truths and individual souls."²⁴ He was educated under the tutelage of Lanfranc, an 11th century monastic theologian and teacher

¹⁷ Nuth, "Two Medieval Soteriologies," 614, 615.

¹⁸ Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 101.

¹⁹ Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 104.

²⁰ Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 104.

²¹ Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 227.

²² Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 205; Hopkins, *Sinful Knights*, 49.

²³ Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 231, 236.

²⁴ Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 246, 306.

known for his early application of reason and logic to Biblical texts, a tactic which found its fulfillment in the scholastic movement. Lanfranc imparted a lifelong intellectual debt to Anselm, and some of his ideas appear in Anselm's earlier writings.²⁵ Although their relationship had broken by the time Anselm composed his *Cur Deus Homo*, remnants of Lanfranc's influence lingered: the *Cur Deus Homo* is the first theological work to mention and use the teachings of Aristotle,²⁶ the ancient philosopher whose work caused later scholastics, including Aquinas, to debate its usefulness in theological writings. As a monk, Anselm himself imparted his theological models to his students, including future clerics, as an instructor for his monastery's educational system. Between the 6th and 11th centuries, monastic schools provided the finest education for the medieval world. Under pressure from the surrounding community, even children external to the monastic system soon began to be admitted to studies at the monastic school.²⁷ The theological movements within monastic life, such as Anselm's, therefore disseminated to at least the upper strata of lay society, and, as preaching and penitential manuals of the period reveal, they eventually reached the populace through the training of preachers in such schools.

Beyond the walls of the cloister, the secular world continued to exist and develop, and, despite Anselm's rejection of the world, it influenced his writings and teachings. With the rising population came struggles for power. Anselm believed that the Jewish population, characterized as "unbelievers," threatened the social fabric of Christian life,²⁸ while the blossoming total population led to tension between secular clerks and monks, the latter having performed sacraments in centuries previously, the former attempting to maintain such power for themselves

²⁵ Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 42-43, 62.

²⁶ Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 50.

²⁷ Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 35-36.

²⁸ Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 62.

due to the growing population and their own growth in numbers.²⁹ Feudal obligations, a chain of lords and servants built upon notions of honor and retribution, characterized social relationships, and people of every rank strove to fulfill their obligations as servants of the almighty God.

Within this late 11th century environment of debt and repayment, of tension over ecclesiastical power, of deep and endless contrition for one's sins in hopes of being one of the spiritually saved few, Anselm developed his arguments presented in *Cur Deus Homo*.³⁰

On its surface, *Cur Deus Homo*, written around 1090, is simply an explanation of Christ's atonement, although an innovative one at that. Building upon the honor-and-justice social structure of his world, Anselm argued that the contemporary honor culture reflected a feature of the universe: people must make amends in kind for the dishonor they have done to others in order to maintain the balance of justice in the universe, and this essential retribution stretches to one's relationship with God.³¹ Actions must always produce consequences, and to forgive an offense without recompense would be an injustice.³² Thus, mankind must make reparations for sin in order to become reconciled to God.³³ However, the greatness of man's sin prevents him from repaying his debt through his own works since the debt is of the greatest possible kind, "for nothing is more intolerable than that a creature should deprive his Creator of due honour, and not repay that of which he deprives Him,"³⁴ and yet this is the action of man with every sin. Like a servant depriving his lord of the lord's rightful obligation, the sinner must receive punishment at the hand of God. That punishment is penance.³⁵ Because man has refused to willingly surrender to God, he has affronted God's honor, and therefore God must take by force what man refused to

²⁹ Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 37.

³⁰ Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 222.

³¹ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, 24.

³² Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, 25.

³³ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, 45.

³⁴ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, 27.

³⁵ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, 29.

give through obedience.³⁶ Penance, done “in proportion to the offence,”³⁷ enables the sinner to attempt “to repay the honour of which he has robbed God: [...] this is the satisfaction which every sinner ought to make to God.”³⁸ The offense of man, against the almighty God, the ultimate feudal lord, requires complete surrender, and this complete surrender is demonstrated through contrition and penitential actions.³⁹ ⁴⁰ No man can fulfill this debt; only God Himself can make satisfaction of His honor through Christ, and yet human beings, out of the contrition they must feel, must live a life of penance in surrendering their wayward wills to God.⁴¹ ⁴²

Yet here also lies a problem with Anselm’s theology: if human beings cannot repay God for the debt of their sin, why perform penance at all? According to the older “Devil’s Rights” theory of atonement, Christ made satisfaction to the Devil, to whom mankind had sold its collective soul through sin, rather than to God’s honor. This proposition appealed to the medieval mindset, which was one of battles, obligations, and justice, on a number of levels: it placed the responsibility for satisfaction in a supernatural battle that justified human works as fighting with

³⁶ Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 220.

³⁷ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, 47.

³⁸ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, 24.

³⁹ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, 79.

⁴⁰ With the necessary surrender of the will itself, a deep and pervasive internal change must occur. For Anselm, as for the world of the Gregorian reforms, this meant perfect contrition. Only God could forgive sins; the role of the priest was to bring forth and affirm the true contrition of the sinner, typically marked by tears followed by works. The penance assigned worked both to reconcile the penitent to the Church and community as well as mitigating some part of the punishment he deserves. (Hopkins, *Sinful Knights*, 51; Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 104). Hopkins summarizes this process: “According to the theologians of contritionism, the remission of sins is achieved when the sinner consents to an infusion of divine grace, which excites in him tears of repentance. These tears are the visible sign of a divine pardon already acquired, which has loosened the bonds of eternal punishment incurred by the sin. At this point the sinner still has to pay a limited, temporal penalty for his sin, and this can only be achieved by being reconciled to the Church through penance and absolution. Thus sacramental absolution confirms a divine pardon already granted, and also fulfils a lesser role in remitting temporal punishment.” (Hopkins, *Sinful Knights*, 50)

⁴¹ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, 64, 24.

⁴² Anselm in *Cur Deus Homo* equates satisfaction with complete restitution, but Bossy has observed that this was not the meaning intended in Roman law (which was enough – but not full – payment to discourage the victim from pursuing legal action against the perpetrator). In later centuries, Roman law was better understood, perhaps influencing the later relative leniency regarding sin in comparison to Anselm’s attitude of penance for all but salvation reserved only for those who surrender most. (Bossy, “Practices of Satisfaction,” 107; Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 215).

Christ, it was an imaginative and entertaining story of good triumphing over evil, and it offered an explicit debt to be paid (Christ paying humanity's debt to the Devil).⁴³ Anselm's theory, on the other hand, raised questions of why satisfaction was necessary at all, since God was repaying humanity's debt to Him with His own sacrifice through Christ.⁴⁴ Thus, it follows that God could simply have forgiven human debt rather than requiring the bloody sacrifice of Christ; despite Anselm's addressing of this question, it led later theologians such as Peter Abelard to conclude, against Christian history, that Christ's death was an instructive example of ultimate love rather than satisfactory atonement.⁴⁵ Most theologians did not take Anselm's conclusions to this level, yet his novel view of penance and satisfaction, with the necessary contrition resulting from one's abhorrence of sin, opened the door for greater leniency and individualization with regards to penance.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the inward focus of Anselm and emphasis on contrition, the overwhelming grief regarding one's sin in characterization of one's life, resulted about 125 years later to the attempt in the Fourth Lateran Council to legislate contrition.

Before the Fourth Lateran Council, however, Alan of Lille wrote a 12th century preaching manual which incorporates Anselm's theology. Alan's manual, intended to help preachers prepare sermons that would teach their hearers how to live proper Christian lives, extols the virtues of living a penitential and ascetic life, truly contrite regarding one's sin and seeking complete surrender to the will of God. All of these elements find corollaries in Anselm's penitential theology discussed above. Remorse for sins, Alan declares, allows healing and forgiveness, saving one from the judgment of the eternal law.⁴⁷ True contrition is deep and life-

⁴³ Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 208.

⁴⁴ Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 208-209.

⁴⁵ Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 210.

⁴⁶ Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 216.

⁴⁷ Alan of Lille, *Art of Preaching*, 120.

long, characterizing the very being of a person rather than simply his actions.⁴⁸ Meditation upon the sacrifice of Christ, “the bubbling lye composed of the ashes of humility and the water of repentance,”⁴⁹ brings forth true contrition. For, Alan argues, “just as we must always have the eradication of our sins in mind, so penitence must remember, that repentance may give rise to remembrance, and remembrance cause sorrow.”⁵⁰ Alan of Lille’s focus on inspiring contrition in his hearers reflects an Anselmian view of penance, namely, that contrition provides the necessary foundation for truly penitential behavior, which then makes satisfaction for sins. Yet the seeds of change crept into Alan’s manual: rather than viewing contrition, confession, and satisfaction in a causal chain, Alan views them as three distinct ways of reacting in kind to committed sin.⁵¹ By removing contrition from its place as the foundation of all penance, Alan of Lille’s preaching manual indicates a subtle shift toward the official ritualization of penance following the Fourth Lateran Council. In this official ritual, confession, contrition, and penitential deeds withdraw into relatively separate categories rather than diffusing into each other as Anselm’s theology had characterized them.

The Fourth Lateran Council and Thomas Aquinas: Sacramentalizing Repentance

Pastoral concerns lay at the heart of the Fourth Lateran Council, and the reforms in confession and penance sprang from these intentions. To the contemporaries of Lateran IV and its aftermath, confession and teaching, especially through pastoral preaching, reflected the same responsibility to the Church community.⁵² Penance became a way for the Church to teach doctrine and piety, and the yearly confession requirement in Canon 21, the *Omnis utriusque*

⁴⁸ Alan of Lille, *Art of Preaching*, 127.

⁴⁹ Alan of Lille, *Art of Preaching*, 121.

⁵⁰ Alan of Lille, *Art of Preaching*, 127.

⁵¹ Alan of Lille, *Art of Preaching*, 127.

⁵² Tanner, “Pastoral Care,” 114, 118.; Jotischky, “Penance and Reconciliation,” 78-79.

sexus decree, restated the pastoral concerns already expressed in sermons of the period.⁵³

Furthermore, penance offered a comfort and means of salvation to the laity in its forgiveness of sins committed after baptism. Unlike earlier forms of penance, completed only once in a lifetime and after which point further sins committed would result in a loss of one's salvation, the annual penance enforced by Lateran IV ensured that the laity would participate in at least an yearly renunciation of sin and participation in works that gave an assurance of salvation.⁵⁴ To the lay mind of the early 13th century, ascetic penitential works assured Christians of their salvation, for they "were skeptical about the goodness of human nature and more inclined to believe in the virtue of works than in the operation of grace. This kind of heroic Christian life obviously meshed with the mentality of social obligations: was God not the Lord to whom one prayed with joined hands, in the typical posture of a vassal giving homage to a more powerful lord?"⁵⁵ By the beginning of the 13th century, penance was thus a key feature of popular piety, and the Fourth Lateran Council attempted to harness and to control the lay energy coursing through the movement.

Jotischky argues that *Omnis utriusque sexus* created an idea of penance rather than solidifying one that already exists.⁵⁶ Yet penance, as we have seen from Anselm's writings and MD Vauchez and Norman Tanner's observations, was a key feature of medieval piety. Lateran IV, therefore, merely ritualized penance into a sacrament, but in doing so it caused the practice of penance to lose its genuine nature and the heartfelt contrition it required.

Omnis utriusque sexus considers confession as the treatment of a disease; penance, the treatment of its symptoms. In requiring yearly confession, the penitential aspect of contrition

⁵³ Vauchez, *Laity*, 104.

⁵⁴ Tanner, "Pastoral Care," 114.

⁵⁵ Vauchez, *Laity*, 92.

⁵⁶ Jotischky, "Penance and Reconciliation," 79.

could no longer be a key component of the forgiveness of sins, for contrition must, according to the earlier reasoning of Anselm and the Gregorian reforms, be a work of the will and not of obligation.⁵⁷ Thus, penance became a sacrament,⁵⁸ its efficacious force coming in name from contrition and in practice from the works assigned to the penitent.⁵⁹ Scholastic theologians, aware of the lack of contrition in their forced penitents, began to ascribe lesser penances in hopes of enticing more people to confession and completion of their penance, thereby reconciling them to the community.⁶⁰

In requiring annual confession from all of Christendom rather than confession practiced as individuals felt motivated to do so, the Fourth Lateran Council placed an immense burden on the Church's priests. In addition to being pure and blameless, teachers of others yet deeply studious, hospitable and peaceful,⁶¹ priests now needed to be wise and discerning like doctors treating a sensitive wound, and to do so frequently for the sacrament of penance.⁶² As Murray aptly states, "A penitent who exposed his soul to a priest was at his most sensitive, and even the slightest failure in judgement could wound."⁶³ Many people shied from confession because they felt the priest did not truly understand their problems or had not handled them and their penance with proper wisdom.⁶⁴ Such wounding was a theologian's nightmare, possibly resulting in

⁵⁷ Hopkins, *Sinful Knights*, 55.

⁵⁸ The medieval sacrament of penance following the Fourth Lateran Council consisted of three divisions: confession, contrition, and satisfaction (Bossy, "Practices of Satisfaction", 107). Thomas Aquinas explains these divisions in his *Summa Theologiae*. In the medieval mindset, as mentioned earlier, the penitential actions became attributed with the forgiveness of sins rather than the contrition which was supposed to be present (Vauchez, *Laity*, 92). However, not all of this penance was of a physical nature; the shame and humiliation inherent in confession was intended to perform part of one's penance (Jotischky, "Penance and Reconciliation", 81).

⁵⁹ Hopkins, *Sinful Knights*, 54.

⁶⁰ Bossy, "Practices of Satisfaction," 108.

⁶¹ Thomas of Chobham, "Rules for Priests," 9.

⁶² Murray, "Counselling," 66.

⁶³ Murray, "Counselling," 69.

⁶⁴ Murray, "Counselling," 69.

scaring away the penitent.⁶⁵ Confessors' manuals therefore rejected earlier lists of crime-and-punishment in favor of more circumstantial penance, following the earlier trajectory set by the Gregorian reforms and Anselm.⁶⁶ However, unlike Anselmian penance, the goal of this confession was to convince the sinner to complete the penance, thereby dissipating the penitent's term and suffering in Purgatory, while also concealing the penitential assignment from the community. Rather than penance being a communal reconciliation, it became a personal reconciliation of man to God. The punishment for one's sin became one not of equal magnitude or kind to the sin committed but only a partial retribution, the rest to be paid in Purgatory.⁶⁷ As a result, penitential assignments weakened as theologians and confessors alike urged priests to consider the penitent's social circumstances and personal wishes when assigning the restorative penitential deeds.⁶⁸ Penance thus became more focused on the penitent's needs and less focused on the work of salvation and the contrition of the person.

Herein lies a discrepancy between the faithful laity and the theologians representative of the Fourth Lateran Council's ideals. The Christian populace sought the assurance of absolution in ascetic behavior imitating the physical and moral suffering of Christ.⁶⁹ To the minds of lay people, absolution lay not in the sacramental words of the priest but instead in their actions, such that they received forgiveness only when "they had carried out a sufficient number of acts or works of reparation, which meant inflicting on their bodies enough suffering and privation to compensate the offense caused to God."⁷⁰ Penitential manuals rose in popularity as priests and theologians attempted to systematically instruct the populace in confessional practices, including

⁶⁵ Bossy, "Practices of Satisfaction," 108.

⁶⁶ Chenu, *Nature*, 229.

⁶⁷ Bossy, "Practices of Satisfaction," 107.

⁶⁸ Hopkins, *Sinful Knights*, 55.

⁶⁹ Vauchez, *Laity*, 24.

⁷⁰ Vauchez, *Laity*, 89.

bringing them to a proper understanding of the sacrament of confession and penance.⁷¹ Further, now that the requirement of confession had eliminated the need for, and often even the possibility of, contrition, priests had to increasingly emphasize the power of the absolution conferred through the sacrament itself. No longer was contrition alone enough to reconcile a man to God.⁷² Instead, through penitential manuals and the priest's teaching, the populace needed to learn how to define exactly the details of the sin itself to the priest in confession. Now the sacramental works imparted grace; contrition might lessen one's assigned penance, but it was optional.⁷³

One of these penitential manuals, originating in Exeter in 1240, reflects the changes in the sacrament of penance as they reached the laity between the Fourth Lateran Council and the *Summa Theologiæ* of Thomas Aquinas. This Exeter manual suggests an Anselmian influence still remaining in popular piety, for it reminds the confessor: "Someone truly penitent should hate sin. He who greatly hates something calls it by the foulest name he can; that is what the penitent should call his sin provided that he is speaking truthfully."⁷⁴ Yet it also shows that the detailed confession practices Lateran IV initiated had taken root, for the author instructs the confessor to recognize a sinner's penitential attitude by the detail of sin confessed.⁷⁵ Further, the confessor must guide the penitent to reveal each transgression against God's laws, and to do so the confessor must question the penitent into considering each of the Ten Commandments and seven deadly sins until the penitent confesses, in detail, every sin against the perfect will of

⁷¹ Hopkins, *Sinful Knights*, 59.

⁷² Hopkins, *Sinful Knights*, 66.

⁷³ Hopkins, *Sinful Knights*, 66; Mansfield, *Humiliation*, 39.

⁷⁴ "A Popular Manual," *Pastors*, 178.

⁷⁵ "A Popular Manual," *Pastors*, 178.

God.⁷⁶ Such interrogation must have terrified at least some of the laity, who began to live in fear of unconfessed sin condemning them to the eternal fires of Hell.⁷⁷ However, the manual's author shows no signs of intending to frighten the laity into submission; instead, he considers confession and penance to be akin to healing from an illness. Penance is the painful cure for the disease of a sinful soul.⁷⁸ This metaphor is identical to that of *Omnis utriusque sexus*, suggesting that this decree had reached the lay world and had begun altering their perceptions of penance.⁷⁹

Into this environment of changing confessional practices came the scholastic thought of Thomas Aquinas. Taking a professorship at the University of Paris in 1257, he entered the forefront of medieval teaching and logical emphases in theological thought, including the debate over the proper usage of Aristotle's writings in theology.⁸⁰ The University of Paris came under the special patronage of Pope Gregory IX, indicating its prominence and importance in the theological world of the 13th century.⁸¹ Thomas Aquinas, like his Dominican friar brothers, lived their motto of balancing personal education with teaching others: "the bow is stretched in learning but the arrow is released in preaching."⁸² According to Aquinas, it was actually sinful for a cleric to spend all his time in study if that time could instead be used to save souls. Yet, he also said, it was better to teach good theology to all than to dedicate oneself to the salvation of a single person.⁸³ Promoting a balance of learning and preaching to others, Aquinas was likely to

⁷⁶ "A Popular Manual," *Pastors*, 172, 174.

⁷⁷ Vauchez, *Laity*, 89.

⁷⁸ "A Popular Manual," *Pastors*, 171.

⁷⁹ Murray, "Counselling," 66.

⁸⁰ Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 65, 68.

⁸¹ Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 43.

⁸² Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 34.

⁸³ Aquinas, *Pastors*, 10-11.

follow such a model himself, and the pastoral concerns underlying his *Summa Theologiæ* indicates that he did just that.⁸⁴

The intellectual world of Aquinas' day had turned toward logic and debate as a primary means of education and instruction, and collaboration between masters in the guise of these debates improved each other's positions. The *Summa* takes much from Aquinas' colleagues, as university masters of the period typically borrowed others' intellectual developments to further their own studies.⁸⁵ What sets the *Summa* apart is Aquinas' integration of Aristotelian philosophy in an era racked with debate regarding the place of the pagan Aristotle in the Christian university education.⁸⁶ Like his Dominican colleagues, Aquinas sought to integrate faith and reason as two means of discerning truth, both gracious gifts from God, that led to the same understandings for the inquisitive mind.⁸⁷ Thus, through his differentiation of attainable from unattainable knowledge, Christian virtues from secular ones, etc., Aquinas was able to incorporate Aristotle's philosophical reasoning into his Christian worldview, so long as Aristotle's writings did not distort what could be understood only through Christian faith.⁸⁸ By compiling and organizing Christian doctrine with his explanations, Aquinas "sought to unite revelation with Greek philosophy and Christianity with Classical culture in a durable synthesis."⁸⁹

Aquinas' elite university world had a greater involvement in the contemporary society than the monks of Anselm's isolated cloisters. In the early 13th century, as universities grew, the University of Paris thrust itself into the center of medieval education, earning special patronage

⁸⁴ Biller, "Confession," 26.

⁸⁵ Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 86.

⁸⁶ Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 93.

⁸⁷ Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 94.

⁸⁸ Examples of such "faith alone" propositions included the true nature of the Trinity and other paradoxical Christian doctrines. (Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 93)

⁸⁹ Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 96.

and attention from Pope Gregory IX.⁹⁰ In 1215 in Paris, the same year as the Fourth Lateran Council, the first university curriculum list appeared, illustrating a shift to the precedence of logic over grammar studies at the university level.⁹¹ Universities required students to both learn and teach in order to be admitted to the master's degree; because of this, we can be certain of Aquinas' training as a teacher, especially in the biannual *disputatio de quodlibet* system reflected in his *Summa*.⁹² Systematic syntheses of information and the ability to respond to any question characterized the debates of the medieval university, furthering scholastic thought and shaping the organization of Aquinas' philosophy and works.⁹³ Outside the privileged walls of the university, where ecclesiastical students learned the most cutting edge theology to carry into the medieval world, prosperity reigned in cities such as Paris, and the minds of the prosperous opened more to new ideas and intellectual pursuits.⁹⁴ Additionally, with the canons of Lateran IV still spreading throughout Christendom and changing religious practice, sharp and thorough university minds like that of Aquinas could address the theological and pastoral concerns of those teaching the populace. Eventually, political disagreements would disturb this peaceful balance, ending the intellectual simultaneous pursuit of faith and reason and separating from theology the philosophy scholastics had so conscientiously aligned with it. However, in Aquinas' day such pursuits continued to be a welcome addition to the theological advances of the Church.⁹⁵

After the Fourth Lateran Council's *Omnis utriusque sexus* decree drew attention once more to the sacrament of penance, it maintained the prominence of penance by requiring annual

⁹⁰ Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 43.

⁹¹ Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 65.

⁹² Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 60.

⁹³ Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 61.

⁹⁴ Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 97.

⁹⁵ Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 97.

confession; confession had previously been performed out of the penitent's free will. With the practice of penance thereby altered,⁹⁶ questions regarding this sacrament led Aquinas to write on the topic at the end of his *Summa Theologiae*, thus addressing these issues and completing his work by circling it back to the almighty Creator.⁹⁷ To Aquinas, the sacrament of penance consisted of contrition, confession, and satisfaction.⁹⁸ It offered healing, like medicine to an ill soul; as a sacrament, it fused physical materials with spiritual effects, and it was a necessary feature of a post-baptism believer's life.⁹⁹ Aquinas argued that penance acted in a reformatory manner, changing the heart through actions and restoring the sinner to God rather than simply dissipating the justified anger of God, as Anselm's earlier theology had claimed. Although Aquinas' view was not supported by church history or texts, resulting in a disconnect between theology and the minimum requirements of confession and penance, his ideas found some support in Fourth Lateran Council requirement of annual confession and its pastoral concerns regarding the ability of penitents to complete their assigned penance.

Contrition, for Aquinas, was important but not key to the sacrament. True repentance was indeed a necessity for the forgiveness of sins, but it functioned ineffectively without an accompanying desire to change.¹⁰⁰ Like Anselm, Aquinas required in his followers a "habitual disposition" of repentance rather than perpetual penitential actions¹⁰¹; unlike him, Aquinas accompanied the emotional rejection of sin, lessened to a define the grief regarding one's offenses against God rather than an utter despising of the sinful will, with a necessity for amendment of wrongdoing. Penitence proper, for Aquinas, was classified as a subset of justice

⁹⁶ Bossy, "Practices of Satisfaction," 109.

⁹⁷ Baldwin, *Scholastic Culture*, 85.

⁹⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* vol. 60, 167.

⁹⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* vol. 60, 23.

¹⁰⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* vol. 60, 25, 57.

¹⁰¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* vol. 60, 39.

because it required both the cessation of sinful behavior and recompense paid for offenses already committed.¹⁰² This virtue of penitence, from whence contrition in the sacrament of penance came, enabled God to forgive the sinner even without the sacrament in cases of inability to participate in confession, so long as a change of will and associated actions accompanied the emotion.¹⁰³ On this, Aquinas retains an Anselmian view despite a lay perception of works resulting in salvation. Rather than the actions of the sacrament itself, Aquinas argues, the penitent's rituals in the sacrament symbolize his change of heart, while the priest's symbolize God forgiving the sin of the penitent.¹⁰⁴ The confusion between signifier and signified is double-sided, as Aquinas notes that some priests also forget that they are conduits of God's forgiveness rather than the givers of absolution themselves.¹⁰⁵ Yet, despite these similarities, Anselm and Aquinas' theologies do diverge, with Aquinas' emphasis on works and the sacrament of penance itself elsewhere in his explanation and Anselm's emphasis that only complete surrender to God's will, rather than individual works, can hope to even begin to repay the debt of mankind to God.

While retaining the importance of contrition in a theological sense, Aquinas also displays his pastoral side through his emphasis on the sacrament of penance itself, regardless of personal contrition. With the requirement of yearly confession due to the Fourth Lateran Council, Aquinas places absolution within the sacrament,¹⁰⁶ thereby ensuring that the populace would, in theory, hear of their forgiven sins at least once a year and, in theory, believe and take comfort in the truth of those words. Although penance in Aquinas' theology works with "internally prompted human acts [...] by God working interiorly," the process of penance is complete only with the

¹⁰² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* vol. 60, 57.

¹⁰³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* vol. 60, 79.

¹⁰⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* vol. 60, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* vol. 60, 13.

¹⁰⁶ Hopkins, *Sinful Knights*, 56.

absolution given by the priest and the outward performance of penitential actions.¹⁰⁷ In fact, it is this outward performance of penance that leads to the inward repentance of the sinner that then leads to the forgiveness of sins¹⁰⁸ – the opposite pattern of Anselm’s contrition leading to actions leading to forgiveness. Satisfaction, according to Aquinas, requires action rather than pure contrition for its fulfillment.¹⁰⁹ Yet, even if one’s penance fails, the absolution granted by the minister is still efficacious: the person’s sins are still forgiven through his participation in the sacrament of penance.¹¹⁰

Living and writing under the shadow of Lateran IV’s *Omnis utriusque sexus* decree, Aquinas recognized and addressed pastoral issues with its implementation, revealing again an underlying pastoral concern in his heavily intellectual scholastic masterpiece. With annual confession required of the laity, contrite heart or not, priests began to manipulate confession and penance into both a protective force and a threat. Spurred on by fear, and concerned primarily with his eternal fate and its connection with performance in this earthly life,¹¹¹ a person often lived in fear of unconfessed sin, driving him to confession.^{112 113} For Aquinas, even this fear-driven repentance served as “an act of God converting the heart,” thus making the penitential sacrament efficacious.¹¹⁴ Other responded to the required yearly penance by faking their

¹⁰⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* vol. 60, 7.

¹⁰⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* vol. 60, 7.

¹⁰⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* vol. 60, 167.

¹¹⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* vol. 60, 97.

¹¹¹ Vauchez, *Laity*, 24.

¹¹² Vauchez, *Laity*, 89.

¹¹³ Such fear tactics in getting the laity to confession are also at least partly responsible for the works-based rather than contrition-based lay understanding of medieval penance. Mansfield explains the consequences of forcing the laity into confession: “Such legalism brought with it a focus on behavior rather than emotion. In the end, the theologians were the prophets less of *Omnis utriusque* and of private sacramental confession than of the voluntary lay devotions of the later Middle Ages, the books of hours and ascetic self-discipline, and indeed, the flagellant processions and indulgences. The theologians had wanted contrition and ended up with a legalistically applied sacramental penance; so they continued to preach contrition and ended up with the late medieval indulgence trade.” (Mansfield, *Humiliation*, 289)

¹¹⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* vol. 60, 67.

contrition, a consequence which actually hindered the theologians' original purpose and message in requiring annual confession.¹¹⁵ Penitential manuals and sermon exempla from the period illustrate preachers' desperate attempts to inspire true contrition in their flocks.¹¹⁶ Aquinas, still maintaining that internal repentance was necessary for the complete forgiveness of sins, suggested that the sacrament of penance itself could still take place and affect the sinner without contrition, but the lack of contrition meant that the sacrament was not protective against future sins of a similar nature or fully efficacious in its forgiveness.¹¹⁷ For the sacrament of penance itself, due to its very nature, had "the power of restoring all defects to soundness, and even of promoting growth. But this is sometimes blocked on man's part when he reacts feebly towards God and the hatred of sin."¹¹⁸

In illustrating loopholes like these, Aquinas' pastoral concern becomes clearer: unable to draw all members of the Church willingly to confession, he met them at their level and incorporated their underlying motives into the comforting arm of the penitential sacrament. All sins were forgiven in penance, for one sin could not be forgiven in isolation.¹¹⁹ It is the sinful spirit which is healed through the practice of penance, not the individual sins. This explanation, if accurately taught to the laity, must have eased stresses invoked by the contemporary practice in the sacrament of penance for naming and detailing all sins; even if a sin was forgotten, its associated debt to God was paid in the penance assigned for the other confessed sins.

Typically, in the study of medieval penitential practices, scholars will look primarily to the preaching and penitential manuals of the period. Vauchez and others have endeavored to

¹¹⁵ Mansfield, *Humiliation*, 289.

¹¹⁶ Mansfield, *Humiliation*, 52.

¹¹⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* vol. 60, 47.

¹¹⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* vol. 60, 141.

¹¹⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* vol. 60, 85.

uncover the true lay practices of the period, and their works are admirable and essential for the complete understanding of medieval penance. My goal, however, was to examine two theologians of the Gregorian reforms and Fourth Lateran Council perspectives on penance, respectively, with the understanding that their writings and ideas slowly disseminated from their ecclesiastical lives into popular practice, as evidenced by the echoes of their theology in the preaching and penitential manuals I did examine. Both of these men, as influential minds in the educational centers of their worlds, strove to learn and to teach new generations of priests and scholars; both were also concerned with the pastoral work of the Church, and this concern underlies their works. For Anselm, the purpose of penance is an attempt to repay mankind's debt to God. Even though human actions alone cannot repay the affront to God's honor sin causes, making retribution dependent entirely upon the sacrifice of Christ, one's complete surrender to the will of God and obedient suffering *in imitatio Christi* granted him his only hope of salvation. Aquinas, on the other hand, believed penance repaid some of a believer's debt for past sins and guarded against future wrongdoing. His focus was the absolution, the forgiveness of a man's sins and opening his heart to God's works even if his contrition is incomplete.

In both theologies, the penitential spirit, or contrition, is key to penance. Anselm viewed it as necessary for life, an overwhelming and deeply emotional hatred of one's sinful will and a desire to eradicate it through penitential actions. Aquinas, on the other hand, viewed contrition as necessary for complete repentance (the act of rejecting a committed sin with regards to future actions), but he does not require it for participation in the sacrament of penance, in accordance with the problems raised by the Fourth Lateran Council's requirement of yearly lay confession. A lack of contrition, according to Aquinas, does not preclude the forgiveness of sins, but it

prevents the full reception of the sacramental benefits and inhibits the sacrament from guarding against future sin.

Both theologians agree on the importance of the contrite heart. Anselm requires a full surrender stemming from the contrition of a heart; very few will achieve this complete surrender and be saved, and most of those, he believes, will be the monks who have separated themselves from the world. Nonetheless, believers of all social lives should, out of their deep contrition, perform penitential actions in attempts to repay their Creator. Because such repayment, according to Anselm, is impossible for human performance, they are striving only for the most repayment possible where full satisfaction is required. Christ pays this full satisfaction: to God, from God. This theological paradox and harsh standard relaxed over time into the contrite heart and individualized penance espoused by Aquinas. Actions effected contrition in Aquinas' view, a stance influenced by the problems inherent in forcing annual confession from the laity, yet contrition effected salvation. As Aquinas's position became the popular sacramental theology,¹²⁰ our selected trajectory reaches its conclusion. Time and theologies have transformed contrition and satisfaction, key terms in Aquinas's theory of penance but raised to theological prominence by Anselm, into concepts working in a relationship Anselm would reject.

¹²⁰ Campbell, "Theologies of Reconciliation," 92.

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