

# The Urban Well

## The Mercy Seminar 2021, Term 2.3

### Opening Comments

This week we turn from repentance and forgiveness in the gospels and the acts and letters of the apostles, to repentance and forgiveness in the first four centuries of the Church. And right away we must become aware of a problem that has bedeviled our understanding of this issue in the present day. We tend to begin with the practice of penance as it developed in the Roman Catholic Church in the medieval period, which we will explore next week, and then look back to the early church to see if we can find some sort of sacrament of penance there. But as you likely saw from the selection of readings I shared with you, the early church is very diverse on this issue, and there is no standard understanding of penance and forgiveness. Hence we must remain humble about the evidence we find, realizing that this may not give us the whole picture. Indeed, it seems clear that the practice of penance varied widely from one area to another, and from one presbyter or bishop to another. However, we can still see some common themes in these writings.

To begin, we must remember that we are looking at the repentance of those who are already baptized, not the repentance of those seeking to be baptized. The text that seems to dominate the whole of the early church comes from Peter's first sermon in the Acts of the Apostles, when he tells his fellow Israelites: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Just as there is only one baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and one bestowal of the Holy Spirit on the baptized, so there should only be one repentance for sin before baptism, after which one should never sin again. This understanding is reinforced by Paul's letter to the Romans, which we did not read last time: "What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." Our baptism into the death of Christ means that sin has been put to death in us, so that as Christ was raised from the dead, we also might walk in holiness and righteousness before God. We also saw in the letter to the Hebrews that there were some early believers who thought there was no repentance for sin after baptism, and this position will reemerge at various points in the Christian tradition, especially around the times of Tertullian and Cyprian. Hence the impression one gets from the New Testament is that there is only one repentance, which precedes the one baptism for the forgiveness of sin, in which one receives the gift of the Holy Spirit, which should free one from sin once for all so that one can live the new life in Christ.

However, it soon becomes clear to the early Christians that some of the baptized do in fact fall into sin after their baptism. So the question arises, is there any hope for them? In the writings on the first page of our texts this week, it seems that each author holds out hope for repentance and forgiveness for the baptized who sin. It is also clear that in Ignatius and Polycarp, it is the presbyters and bishops who have the authority to forgive repentant sinners and restore them to communion with the church, which includes being able to participate in holy communion itself, whereas the Didache and Clement of Rome seem to suggest that believers confess their transgressions, seek to be reconciled with one another, and maintain the unity of love, which themselves lead to their being forgiven. There is no suggestion in any of these texts that there is only one repentance for sin after baptism.

When we turn to Clement of Alexandria, however, we see a very strong statement of the idea that there might be a second repentance after the first one preceding baptism, but Clement qualifies this quite severely. If a baptized believer is tempted by the devil, and is overcome by force and fraud, he or she may repent once. But note that the only sin for which Clement allows for repentance is involuntary or coerced sin, and it seems that even coerced sin will only be forgiven once. On the other hand, for those who sin intentionally and voluntarily after they are baptized, Clement says that they ought to fear as those no longer offered the forgiveness of sins.

Tertullian intensifies this focus on one repentance for sins committed after baptism. He very reluctantly allows for one occasion of repentance after baptism, lest he appear to encourage believers to sin. But he does teach that God allows one repentance—but only one—for sins committed after baptism. However, he does not want to discourage the sinner from repenting, even as he wants to discourage believers from ever sinning. “Let it by all means be irksome to sin again, but let not to repent again be irksome.” These concerns are not unique to Tertullian, however: the Didache on the one hand sternly warns that whoever sins after baptism is condemned to the fires of hell, and yet the text later tells the bishops to seek after the baptized who have sinned to restore them to communion with the church. Cyprian, Ambrose, and Augustine all echo this idea, that there is one repentance for the baptized.

However, we also see in the reading the idea that all the baptized sin, and so need continually to repent. Polycarp says that “we are all under a debt of sin. If we entreat the Lord to forgive us, we ought also to forgive.” And Augustine indicates that every believer will fall into sin at one time or another. It appears therefore that not all sins are equal. This becomes quite clear in Origen: “For in more serious offenses, a place is given only once for penance, but these common ones which we frequently commit, always receive repentance and are brought back without interruption.” Ambrose makes the same kind of distinction when speaking of repentance after baptism: “for we must repent our daily faults, but this latter has to do with lighter faults, the former with such as are graver.” Augustine echoes this by making a distinction between sin and crime: “Although every crime is a sin, not every sin is a crime.” And he speaks later about “light sins” that we ought not to treat lightly, but should rather confess.

We see the difference between these serious offenses and lighter sins in Origen’s discussion of the seven forms of the forgiveness of sins in the gospel:

(5) **First** is the one by which we are **baptized** “for the remission of sins.” A **second** remission is in the suffering of **martyrdom**. **Third**, is that which is given through **alms**. A **fourth** remission of sins is given for us through the fact that **we also forgive the sins of our brothers**. A **fifth**

forgiveness of sins is when “someone will **convert a sinner** from the error of his way.” There is also a **sixth** forgiveness through **the abundance of love**. And there is a **seventh** remission of sins **through penance**, although admittedly it is **difficult and toilsome**, when the sinner washes “his couch in tears,” and his “tears” become his “bread day and night,” when he is not ashamed to **make known his sin to the priest** of the Lord and to **seek a cure**.

It is clear that the first six forms of forgiveness are for the common sins mentioned earlier by Origen, for none of these break communion with the church through love, nor do they entail the loss of the Holy Spirit. So grave sins entail the loss of love and the loss of the Holy Spirit.

So what are these more serious offenses, these graver faults, these crimes? Three sins rise to the top quite quickly, for there is passionate and divisive debate during this period as to whether any of these sins can be forgiven: idolatry or apostasy, adultery, and murder. Depending on the locale and the bishop, these may or may not be forgiven even after a long period of repentance. These sins are also highlighted in the penitential canons of the fourth century:

### CANONS OF THE CHURCH COUNCIL

Elvira (Granada) ca. 309 A. D.

<b>ANON 1</b>	It is decided that anyone of mature age, who, after the faith of saving baptism, approaches a temple as an idolater and commits this major crime, because it is an enormity of the highest order, is not to receive communion—even at the end [of his life].
<b>CANON 2</b>	Flamines [i.e. priests of pagan cults] who, after the faith of font and regeneration, have sacrificed, since they have thereby doubled their crimes by adding murder, or even tripled their evil deed by including sexual offense, are not to receive communion—even at the end.
<b>CANON 3</b>	At the same time, Flamines who have not actually sacrificed but simply performed their functions may, since they have refrained from the deadly sacrifices, be offered communion at the end, provided that the required penance has been done. If, however, after the penance they commit a sexual offense, it is decided to accord them no further communion, lest they seem to make a mockery of the Sunday communion.
<b>CANON 4</b>	Again, Flamines who are catechumens [i.e. studying Christianity, but not yet baptized] and who have refrained from sacrifices shall be admitted after a period of three years.

**CANON  
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If a woman is overcome with rage and whips her maidservant so badly that she dies within three days, and it is doubtful whether she killed her deliberately or by accident, provided that the required penance has been performed, she shall be readmitted after seven years, if it was done purposefully; and after five years if it was done accidentally. In the event that she becomes ill during the set time, let her receive communion.

**Council of Nicea, 325 CE, Canon 11:** Concerning those who have fallen without compulsion, without the spoiling of their property, without danger or the like, as happened during the tyranny of Licinius, the Synod declares that, though they have deserved no clemency, they shall be dealt with mercifully. As many as were communicants, if they heartily repent, shall pass three years among the hearers; for seven years they shall be prostrators; and for two years they shall communicate with the people in prayers, but without oblation.

These more serious sins can only be forgiven after the laborious and difficult penance mentioned by Origen, which he describes more fully later on in this homily: “But if in the bitterness of your weeping you have been consumed in mourning, tears, and lamentations, if you have tortured your flesh and become parched with fastings and much self-restraint and have said, ‘My bones were fried as a frying pan,’ then you have offered ‘as a sacrifice, fine wheat flour from the frying pan or gridiron.’ In this way, you will have discovered that you have offered sacrifices more fittingly and more perfectly, which Israel can no longer offer according to the Law.” This is the form of penance described by Tertullian as *exomologesis*. The penitent should make their repentance public by wearing sackcloth and ashes, fasting, praying and asking others to pray for them, groaning, weeping, crying out to the Lord, bowing before presbyters and kneeling before other members of the church. By doing all these things, they expunge eternal punishments and appease God. Cyprian speaks in a similar way on p. 4, and he includes the performance of righteous works, by the doing of which sins are purged and souls are freed from death. And Ambrose speaks of becoming a different person through self-denial, which we will explore more fully later on. Those who repent in this very public way should be restored to communion with the church by the bishop, after the time prescribed by the bishop. He will lay his hands on the penitent one while all pray for him or her, and thereby restore the Holy Spirit, and thus communion with the church, to the penitent one. However, all of the authors we read for this week agree that one can only repent once for such sins, after which there is no repentance and no forgiveness.

We can now understand why many during this time, including Augustine, put off getting baptized until they had their passions well under control by becoming celibates, for the married life gives far too many occasions for sin after baptism. We can also see how the monastic movement grows out of this understanding of repentance, especially in the statement of Ambrose: “Does anyone think that that is penitence where there still exists the striving after earthly honors, where wine flows, and even

conjugal connection takes place? The world must be renounced; less sleep must be indulged in than nature demands; it must be broken by groans, interrupted by sighs, put aside by prayers; the mode of life must be such that we die to the usual habits of life. Let the man deny himself and be wholly changed.” The monastic movement will come to see the life of the monk as one of continual repentance, in which the monk denies himself and is wholly changed.