

3 Sin and Penance

From Christianity in the West, 1400-1700
by John Bossy (OUP Paperback)

(i) Sin

In the age of Dante, Langland and Chaucer, and still in the age of Thomas More, when the Scottish poet William Dunbar wrote a poem about them, the principal vehicle of the moral tradition of the West was the doctrine of the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, anger, avarice, gluttony, sloth and lechery in that order. As a moral system the seven deadly sins were not a model of coherence, and expositors differed a good deal in their attempts to reduce them to order. Most of them, however, brought to the sequence a distinction between the spirit and the flesh, divided the sins according to whether they were diseases of one or the other, and argued that diseases of the spirit were more to be avoided than diseases of the flesh. Pride, envy and anger fell into the first category; gluttony, lechery and usually sloth into the second; avarice shifted insecurely between one and the other. So interpreted, the seven deadly sins were a system of community ethics making more excuse for the sins of concupiscence than for those of aversion. The sins of aversion destroy community, but without some flirtation with the sins of concupiscence there is unlikely to be a community at all.

This community ethics was expounded in the Lenten sermons of the pre-Reformation period by parsons, friars, and town and cathedral preachers, whose doctrine of sin may be represented, more or less, by the parson's 'tale' which concluded Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and was composed about 1390. For him, as for Dante, pride, envy and wrath came first. Pride was a social, not a metaphysical or Promethean, phenomenon and consisted essentially in putting the claims of degree before those of sociability. The parson recalled Dante on the social benefits of humility and the central importance of the act of greeting or salutation, but, unlike Dante, failed to convey the feeling that these were transcendental matters. He was convincing on envy, as were most of his

contemporaries, whose treatment of the subject may confirm the view that envy is the characteristic vice of populations of peasants. Envy had two branches: jealousy of other men's prosperity, and pleasure in their misfortune. It implied, as Dante had explained, what has been called the doctrine of the limited good: the theory which holds that there is a fixed amount of good fortune in the world, so that what accrues to one member of a community is so much taken from the rest. It was, the parson thought, the worst of all sins, since the most directly opposite to solidarity and charity, and the source of back-biting, rancour and discord. It was related to wrath as an interior feeling to its outward expression: wrath did not really mean uncontrollable bad temper, but a settled and formal hatred towards a neighbour, inspiring acts of malice or vengeance against him. We need to understand the universal presence of wrath in the moral thinking of the later Middle Ages. It was the legitimate posture of God towards the seed of Adam, and also cultivated by the saints, though less than hitherto; the Devil, the universal fiend, was a pure embodiment of it; a wide range of human acts was thought to exemplify it. The parson's list naturally contained manslaughter, and swearing, cursing and verbal abuse; but also usury, and the refusal of wages and alms; witchcraft, conjuring and divination; contraception, onanism and abortion. As it concealed a doctrine of the limited good, this moral theory also implied that social acts were performed in a universe of friendship and enmity: love of one's enemy was the supreme Christian virtue because it was the hardest of all, and because it was the true imitation of Christ 'that died for his enemies'.

The parson did not prove a very coherent guide to concupiscence. This may have been due to a lack of experience, learning or vision on Chaucer's part, or the fault may have been more general. The sins of concupiscence were made to seem either trivial, like sloth and gluttony (mainly in drink), or really sins against solidarity, like avarice and lechery: by lechery he mainly meant adultery, which took up more space than any other sin and was ascribed principally to wives and priests. There was nothing here of the exquisite union of tenderness and severity in Dante's portrayal of Paolo and Francesca in the *Divine Comedy*: adultery was not a case of the ambiguities of love, but a particularly nasty form of theft. No doubt this was more realistic; and it would certainly have been customary for Dante to have made more of the

fact that the lovers' story ended in their murder by Francesca's husband, an example of the perturbation and dissension among men which adultery was peculiarly apt to provoke. In fact the incoherence of the late medieval discussion of adultery, and of sexuality in general, seems to lie in a failure to be entirely candid about the nature of the perturbation caused: what was being presented as an offence against charity was often actually being felt as an offence against holiness. The parson's choice of language would have confirmed a general feeling that the sexual act was intrinsically shameful, like leprosy, and that its ominous influence in communities lay not so much in causing havoc in human relations, as in diffusing a pollution which would automatically bring down the wrath of God upon all. Hence the ban on marriage during Lent and at other seasons, the doctrine that sexual acts between the married were always venially sinful, the purification of women after childbirth, the peculiar preoccupation with sexuality among priests. The pollutant conception of sexuality had probably been intensified by well-intended efforts of Aristotelian theologians like Thomas Aquinas to take a naturalistic or biological view of ethics; these had the effect of much extending the concept of sins against nature while failing to make much impression on the traditional view of conventional sexual relations between the married.

This accommodation to instincts about sexual pollution must make one hesitate before accepting the idea of the seven deadly sins as an instrument for maintaining the primacy of charity. Yet whenever, for example, the ethics of sixteenth-century rural communities are investigated, as they have been in England, in Italy and elsewhere, what invariably comes to light is the feeling that charity was what mattered. The disparity of evidence does not, in my opinion, indicate a serious difference of moral judgement between the teachers and the taught, but it does seem to say something about a particular complex of moral convictions widely prevailing in the West on the eve of the Reformation. My impression is not that the average soul now thought chastity more important than charity, but that between them preachers and people had created a moral consensus dwelling by predilection on topics where the two could be seen as one: unchastity as a social offence, and uncharity as a type of the unclean. Hence, as will emerge, the growing obsession with witchcraft. Hence the last expression of moral revivalism in unreformed Christendom, the

puritan commonwealth erected in Florence during the 1490s by the Dominican prophet Savonarola. Hence also the complicated mixture of outrage, disgust and anxiety which inspired the rabbling of married priests or the massacre of Protestants by embattled traditionalists during the sixteenth century.

In the mean time two things had happened which were to bring to a close the reign of the seven deadly sins as the principal vehicle of the moral tradition of the West. After a good deal of experiment by authors and preachers unsatisfied with their traditional order on the grounds that it gave the sins of concupiscence, including avarice, insufficient prominence, and of criticism by humanists who thought the whole concept barbarous, a new order was arrived at; it kept pride at the top, but promoted avarice and lechery and demoted envy and anger in the list. It was consecrated by the Catholic catechisms of the sixteenth century, and one of the reasons for its adoption was that in Latin the initial letters of the sins formed the more memorable, though meaningless, word *saligia*; it does not seem to suggest any very intelligible concept of sin. This was less important than it might have been, for the sevenfold entity had by now been relieved of the major burden of the moral conscience of Christians. It had been replaced by the Ten Commandments. For Chaucer, and indeed for Dante, these had been a high doctrine, to be left to divines; there were still in the sixteenth century quite well-informed Catholics, like the Friulian miller Menocchio, the hero of Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*, who had never heard of them. But the advent of the catechism was to confirm, on all sides of the confessional mêlée, a transition to the Ten Commandments as the moral system of the West which the teaching Church seems to have largely made in the fifteenth century. Its results may fairly be described as revolutionary.

In trying to relate this moral tradition to the facts of life during the century or so before the Reformation, we shall have, for better or worse, to do without statistics. I doubt if we can do better than proceed on the assumption that in a system of transcendental ethics there will be some positive correlation between the centrality of a precept and the frequency with which it is breached. If, that is, we take the moral tradition to be preaching, however imperfectly, the primacy of charity and the relative benignity of the sins of con-

cupiscence, we can expect the sins of aversion to be those to which people were peculiarly inclined. There seems reasonable evidence that this was the case. They included sins which were actually regarded as virtuous or obligatory in the only alternative moral tradition in the field, which turned on the notions of honour and dishonour. This tradition supported a code of behaviour which required retaliation for offences, entered into a confusing relation with ideas of Christian provenance in the concept of chivalry, and emerged in purer form and with lasting influence in the sixteenth-century Italian ethos of the duel. It was not, at least until this point, the prerogative of the nobility, though it may be that for the rest of the population, as for women, honour and shame were more exclusively implicated in sexual matters.

The sensitivities of honour were a considerable factor in the 'tension' and 'violent tenor' of fifteenth-century life which form the subject of a famous chapter of Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. Huizinga's may not be a name to conjure with in the history of criminality, and his specific attribution of primacy to the sins of pride and avarice may seem overdone. But there is something fundamentally persuasive about his depiction of the overmastering power in fifteenth-century people of the passions of aversion and hostility, of a delight in hatred and vengeance against which the pleasures of concupiscence seem pale and contrived. No wonder, wrote the Burgundian chronicler Chastellain, that princes are so often at enmity with one another, 'for they are men . . . and their natures are subject to many passions such as hatred and envy, and their hearts a very sink of these, because of the pride they have in ruling'. The description would do as well for the age of Henry VIII as for that of Joan of Arc.

Vengeance among princes, party passion in cities and states, the diligent pursuit of social hostilities at every level of the pyramid of status, the universal conviction that the social and political worlds were divided into one's friends and one's enemies: these were possibly not more prevalent in actual fact than they had been in Dante's time. Perhaps they only appear so because of a multiplication of legal instances or the advance of a more abstract and public view of crime. Still, no one could say that fifteenth-century moral authorities like San Bernardino, who preached the primacy of charity to the citizens of Siena, were not expounding a relevant morality.

Outside the handbooks for confessors, and the records of Church courts struggling with the modalities of the marriage contract, the chronicles of fifteenth-century concupiscence deal mainly in adultery, rape and prostitution. They suggest in the outlook of civic authorities, who represented something like a state of public opinion, a balance leaning towards togetherness and against holiness, though it differed in different places. Florence, perhaps because of its reputation as a sink of sodomy, seems to have been an unusually puritan city. It was organising adolescent continence well before Savonarola made this the spearhead of his moral revival, and was already cultivating the privacy and domesticity which generally go with it. Northern cities like Ypres, where sensibilities were less refined, offered a *de facto* tolerance to certain kinds of harmless fornication while cracking down fiercely on female adultery, but also on rape, which was extremely common and usually connected with other sorts of violence. Female adulterers were drowned and rapists hanged. Prostitution was a profession exercised in the public baths, called *étuves*, *stoven* or stews: Flanders had a reputation for its girls, and exported them to London and the south. It was not formally legal, and prostitutes and bawds might expect to be had up from time to time; but the climate was obviously more like that of twentieth-century than of Victorian London, and one may find scenes from the stews carved on the roof-beams of town halls.

By contrast with this residual shiftiness of attitude in the north, a number of southern towns took a perfectly coherent attitude to prostitution. Like the Netherlanders, they dreaded adultery and rape as the really baleful effects of lechery, and looming threats to the Christian peace of their cities; they also seem to have been confronted with a custom of collective rape by gangs of youths which was deeply entrenched in local mores. No doubt it was something to do with the concept of honour. Their conclusion was that it was their Christian duty to authorise and maintain a properly supervised system of public prostitution, additional to what was provided by the stews. Their municipal brothels were supposed not to admit young boys, married men or the clergy, and to close in Holy Week, on Sundays and some other feasts. The girls and their manageress were considered to be practising an honourable and useful profession; their behaviour seems to have been sober, even pious, and they might look forward at the end of their career to a

respectable marriage and a municipal dowry, or to a decent retirement in a convent of *filles repenties*. The institution has been found during the fifteenth century from Dijon to Avignon: its decline in the middle of the sixteenth, in consequence of a series of suppressions concluded by a French royal edict of 1560, seems to mark the same kind of transition as the reordering of the seven deadly sins.

Something of the sort was evidently happening in Italian cities in the transition from the Renaissance to the Counter-Reformation, as is testified by the publication of Boccaccio, from the 1570s, in expurgated editions. Some may wonder whether *The Decameron* should be taken as a moral treatise, but Boccaccio had certainly preached that the sins of concupiscence were trivial by comparison with the sins of aversion; his rider that the Christian community would suffer more by repressing than by tolerating them was in keeping with the views of the burghers of Dijon and Avignon. Traces of it may be found in Italian pastoral practice around 1500, and in the (by then distinctly embarrassed) defence of the Roman stews put up by Catholic propagandists later in the century. But the tradition about concupiscence, still probably quite strong among the rural population, though struggling with deep if inarticulate feelings of shame, had by this time suffered a weakening of the flank which made it vulnerable to the artillery trained upon it by moralists of holiness from Savonarola to Carlo Borromeo. The civilised morality of the Italian élite in the early sixteenth century was in many ways attractive, but from the point of view of the moral tradition it had the flaw of failing to maintain its tolerance towards the flesh inside the historic structure of concern about the passions of hostility. In devaluing like several popes, or positively despising like Machiavelli, the superior claims of peace and charity, the learned and powerful of early sixteenth-century Italy showed themselves to be in something like the moral crisis which Burckhardt diagnosed in *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*.

To be fair to them, they were victims of an exterior process beyond their control. As, throughout Europe, the retaliation and regulation of offences drifted out of the field of private arrangement into the purview of the secular ruler and ultimately of the abstract State, the institutions of Christianity drifted into a position marginal to the maintenance of peace among Christians. As

the peace of reconciliation gave way before the peace of tranquillity, the Church was bound to find its traditional hierarchy of values losing its grip on reality, and to look for a new one. The process took a very long time: there is no reason to agree with the opinion that by 1600 sexuality had become the central matter of Catholic ethics. But in the long run it is probably true that the Church made up on the roundabouts of concupiscence what it had lost on the swings of aversion.

(ii) Carnival

Sin required penance from the individual, as Dante had expounded it; it also, as a stain on the community of Christians, required penance from the population at large, collective ascetic rituals of which the most important was the annual season of Lent. Though generally felt to be essential to individual salvation and public prosperity, penance remained a daunting prospect: the task of persuading people to enter upon it was likened by the Strassburg preacher John Geiler to getting a horse on to a small boat. The horse might pass more readily if its steps were guided by the formalities of a rite of passage. So by the sixteenth century the moment at which the population passed from its carnal into its penitential state had become a time for the vigorously cultivated rites of separation generally known as Carnival. These were, despite some appearances, Christian in character, and they were medieval in origin: although it has been widely supposed that they continued some kind of pre-Christian cult, there is in fact no evidence that they existed much before 1200. The Italian term *carnevale* derived from the *dominica carnevalis* or Quadragesima Sunday, the feast which in the Roman and Milanese liturgies marked for the clergy the passage from the normal to the penitential regime, and signified the abolition of meat or flesh; those words in use in other vernaculars (*antruejo/introitus*, *carême-entrant*) referred to the entrance into Lent. As a period of time and a moral conception Carnival was one half of an entity of which the other half was Lent. The unity-in-opposition of the pair, which seems a notable instance of the structural anthropology practised by Claude Lévi-Strauss, was the theme of the French and Spanish poems which diffused the conception in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and also of a line of pictorial representations

memorably concluded in the middle of the sixteenth by the *Fight between Carnival and Lent* of Pieter Bruegel.

Carnival normally occurred, and has continued to occur, as a series of three or six days ending on Shrove Tuesday or *Mardi Gras*. These were feast-days in that work was prohibited, the private became public, and communities functioned as a whole or through bodies specially created for the purpose. The object of the feast was to represent the workings of carnality in general and, out of the doings of the past year, to bring the corpus of sin to light, in order that it might be got rid of in time for Lent. Carnality was almost invariably embodied in a carnival figure who dominated the feast, was carried in procession during it, and tried, condemned and executed (usually by burning) at the end of it. In these more formal proceedings the seven sins were represented by Gluttony, just as abstinence from meat had come to represent the penitential asceticisms of Lent. Carnival was a fat man; during the feast it was obligatory to eat a great deal, especially fat things like pigs and pumpkins, and drink to match; in Nantes Shrove Tuesday was dedicated to S. Dégobillard (St Vomit), whom one may think an appropriate patron for the whole feast.

It should not be deduced from this that Carnival was more concerned with the sins of concupiscence than with those of aversion. Certainly a good deal of sexual display and obscene insult was required. Prostitutes, whatever their status during the rest of the year, were essential; bears, cocks and other symbols of lechery abounded in the iconography; massive representations of the penis, plain in Naples or disguised as enormous sausages in Königsberg, were carried in procession through the streets. Since the object of the performance was to expose what was concealed, it was natural that conduct to which shame attached should be a favourite target for exposure. But the display of sexuality was no more binding, at least in this early period of Carnival, than the display of more or less symbolically refined violence and hostility. The days of Carnival, as its best historian the Spaniard Julio Caro Baroja says, are days 'when the collective expression of envy, anger and enmity is legitimate'; a climate of fear and insecurity, of exposure to authorised violence rendered anonymous by the wearing of masks, must be maintained and accepted. In well-regulated cities at times of no particular stress, the obligations of aversion might be met by the trading of insults, the throwing of rotten eggs,

or a bit of symbolic theft; but it was in the nature of the occasion that real violence, individual assassination or collective riot, was always likely to occur. Examples from Switzerland and Corsica make it plain that the 1580 carnival of Romans in Dauphiné, chronicled by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie in *The Peasants of Languedoc* (1966) and elsewhere, was following a reasonably well-trodden route. Here the symbolic hostility of three ritual fraternities, sharpened by a variety of exterior tensions at the time of the Wars of Religion, escalated into civil war and a small massacre; what seems more significant than the riot itself is that most of the population does not appear to have noticed that anything much had gone wrong. Somewhere between symbolic and genuine violence one must put the carnival games, which included early forms of football, then as now a satisfying outlet for collective hostility. The Spaniards developed a theologically elegant version of the game where the object was to deposit in the territory of the other side a ball into which the collected dirty linen of one's own had been ritually packed.

Arguments about whether the function of Carnival was to overturn or to maintain Society seem pointless, since there existed no such thing. If it took what we should call a political tone, putting the pope or the militant reformer Zwingli, Henri III or Cardinal Mazarin in the place of the figure to be burned, or harassing the officers of justice and taxation, this was because these were members of the body of Christ whose position gave them opportunities denied to others for infecting it with concupiscence and ill feeling. The world was turned upside-down to see what was crawling about underneath.

The real mystery about the feast is why it came into existence in some regions of Christendom rather than others: in, that is, Italy, including the islands, the Iberian peninsula, most of France, Switzerland and much of Germany, but less or not at all in north-west France, the British Isles, the Netherlands except for a southern fringe, north Germany or Scandinavia. One cannot put this distribution down to the Reformation, which it pre-dated, and must allow for the capacity of the feast to spread by imitation, since it was certainly taken up by the Jews, and apparently by the Russians as well. Carnival is of its nature something to do with penance, and I suggest that it is in the history of penance that we ought to look for an explanation of its origins and the limits of its diffusion. The

regions of northern and north-western Europe which eat pancakes on Shrove Tuesday and do not celebrate Carnival were the regions where in the early Middle Ages the penitential tariff had been invented and received, and where confession and penance had always been individual matters; the liturgical procedure of public penance had been the tradition of the specifically Roman, and then of the Carolingian, West. Carnival, it would seem, had come into existence where a tradition of public confession and penance had been left in the air by the further progress of privacy after 1215:

(iii) Penance and Indulgence

While the remission of sins was in the textbooks the effect of a threefold action of contrition, confession and satisfaction performed in private between an individual sinner and an individual priest, it was in practice governed, like marriage, by an unwritten tradition that sin was a visible and social matter to be redeemed by acts as visible and social as the Passion of Christ. Not that there was any shortage of contrition, rather the reverse; but its spontaneous expression largely overflowed the sacramental channel provided to contain it. In the first place the tradition of public penance was visibly present in the operations of the Church courts, whose business was to deal with public sin and public reconciliation; and though their fees were unpopular and their activities tending to be restricted to matrimonial questions by the jealousy of competing jurisdictions, their operations continued to attract a wide degree of general support. This was notably true in matters of slander and defamation. The jurisdictions which superseded them were obliged to borrow their methods, since these were deeply ingrained in social practice.

But, whether theologians wished it or no, the tradition was almost equally present in the field of sacramental penance, which claimed to be dealing only with the interior man. Since 1215 people had been required to acknowledge their sins annually to the priest of the parish, or to some other legally qualified priest, and to carry out the satisfactory penance which would be enjoined on them, before they could be admitted to receive their Easter communion. The obligation was not very popular, but by the fifteenth century all but a few of them were fulfilling it. They were also, and a good deal more spontaneously, confessing their sins in the shadow of

death. In either case, the sacrament represented a moment of critical transition: for the community and for the individual, a passage from a baptised but sinful condition into a supernatural state of 'grace', a passage from particularity towards membership of the whole body of Christ, a reconciliation to God and the neighbour. The characterisation may seem anachronistic. The penitential regime which, in the words of a speaker at the Council of Trent, 'reconciled all the members of Christ' to one another, restored the condition of supernatural peace to a Christian community whose wholeness had been vitiated by the sin of its members, and enabled them to pray together in charity for God's forgiveness of the sinner, was not the regime which formally prevailed at the close of the Middle Ages. Nor was it presupposed by the arguments of theologians fascinated by the power of binding and loosing which they held to reside in the hands of the priest. But the unilateral reconciliation to God of which they treated was not an adequate description of late medieval confession.

At death-bed confessions, for which we possess a vast body of documentation in the contents of wills, the crucial matter was the seeking and giving of pardon for offences committed against others or those committed by others against oneself. As it had been in the knightly death-scenes of the *Song of Roland*, so it continued to be. In Paris, as late as the middle of the seventeenth century, we are told by the French historian Pierre Chaunu with his wonted statistical precision, 57.5 per cent of wills required the heirs of the dying to make reparation for offences committed by the testator against others, and 42.4 per cent granted pardon for offences committed by others against him.⁵ We can be pretty sure that in 1400 the percentage in each case would have been a good deal nearer 100. The habit of death-bed restitution for the offence of usury, often remarked on by economic historians, was a particular instance of a universal practice. Confession and restitution were for the dying an essential incident in the passage of the Christian towards an unsullied membership of the community of believers.

Both death-bed confession and the annual confession of Lent entailed for the penitent a duty of reconciliation with his neighbour. The main difference between them was that the average soul felt little enthusiasm for the task without the stimulus of an impending confrontation with his maker or the expectation of reciprocity which might accrue from the 'truce of death'. Apart

from concubinage, the most frequent reason why people failed to fulfil the obligation of annual confession was that they were in a state of hostility with a neighbour, and proposed so to continue; and if, as seems usually the case, they were sufficiently afraid of exclusion from communion and community to come to confession, they came in no very different frame of mind. Except in the case of sexual sins, where shame seems to have been a governing instinct and it was often difficult or embarrassing for them to say anything at all, they came by all accounts in an aggressive and self-righteous mood, determined not to concede their own faults without emphasising the superior iniquity of others. They acted on the assumption, probably correct, that they had better do for their neighbour what it would be foolish to trust him to do for himself.

One may characterise their behaviour as a failure to rise to the standards demanded of them by theologians, but find a number of reasons for it. Some resisted the principle of self-accusation, in which the moral and psychological virtue of confession was held to lie, as a violation of the ethics of honour; others doubted the reliability of priests; many were certainly unable to recount their doings under the abstract categories which they were instructed to use, or to envisage actions as sinful except in a context of actual human relations. Their behaviour also expressed the positive conviction that sin was a state of offence inhering in communities rather than in individuals, and may have reflected the gospel injunction to 'tell the church' if their brothers had offended against them. The annual practice of the sacrament tended to encourage people in this view: even though, apparently with some exceptions in Germany, it was no longer formally speaking a collective rite, it was likely to be a more or less communal occasion, which normally occurred at the beginning of Holy Week. Writers and councils insisted that the priest was to receive his penitents not in a cell or sacristy but in some publicly visible part of the church, so that their communications were likely to be witnessed at no great distance by the assembled body of their neighbours. The ritual of absolution involved the laying of a hand by the priest on the head of a penitent, a public act by which the sinner was restored to the social communion of the Church, and seen to be so restored. The granting of absolution was contingent on the penitent's performing visible acts of reparation for his sin. In so far as the party offended was God, the acts were those of sacramental satisfaction, and these,

according to the theologians, were what completed the sacrament; but where the party offended was also the neighbour, the reparatory act was that of restitution. According to theologians, restitution did not figure as a part of the sacramental sequence; yet without it, as without the laying aside of enmity, the process of reconciliation to God would not be achieved. All authors of advice to confessors spent a great deal of time in discussing restitution, obsessed as they might well be by the problem of reconciling it with privacy; the problem occurred also with strictly sacramental satisfactions which would naturally reveal to curious or prurient neighbours the nature of the sin in question. These problems are vividly conveyed by the quantity of advice offered to priests about what to do with a wife who confessed to an adulterous relationship from which a child had been born understood by her husband to be his own. The absolution of the woman for her sin was one thing, the calculation of its social consequences quite another. In the fulfilment of his responsibility for the exterior maintenance of the marriage alliance, not to mention the prevention of war between the families and a foreseeable chain of murders and further adulteries, the priest was nearly always advised to instruct the wife that she might not relieve her conscience by telling her husband what she had done. In his function as confessor he was called to be a counsellor and diplomat, dealing with the interests of the community at large and procuring the peace of the Church, as well as a guardian of the secret passage between the soul and God. This was not quite the world of Graham Greene.

Between the time of Gerson and that of Luther, the genuinely private conception of confession was certainly making progress. Thomas Tentler, drawing on the confessional manuals, has insisted on the interior disciplinary and consolatory function of the sacrament—what Luther called the medicining of sick consciences—and on its less attractive consequences like a growth of scrupulosity among penitents and the pedantic scrutiny of conjugal behaviour. One can ask how much of this penetrated the popular practice of confession, but it does seem likely that the diffusion of manuals, particularly after the invention of printing, reinforced the trend towards privacy. This was furthered by a multiplication of personal confessors among the nobility; and more generally by the failure of the parish clergy to maintain a monopoly of confession against the friars. It can be illustrated by two practical

developments of the fifteenth century. One was a novel concern with the confession of children: there seems to have been a distinct shift downwards in the age from which the obligation to confess was thought to apply, from somewhere about 14 to somewhere about 7. Gerson seems to have been here a real pathfinder, and it must be obvious that if young children were to be considered suitable for the sacrament it could not have as a prime purpose the settlement of social conflicts. This concern went along with a rapid growth in the fifteenth century of the idea of confession as a medium of instruction, and with a proliferation of the little guides to confession, expounding the deadly sins and the Ten Commandments, the *Pater*, *Ave* and Apostles' Creed, which were the precursors of sixteenth-century catechisms. It was also from about 1400, Gerson here again being the principal initiator, that the notion of frequent confession, that is to say a monthly or otherwise regular event outside a ritual context, began to be proposed to the laity.

These were important developments for the future. For the time being, sacramental penance retained for the average penitent and the average priest characteristics which attached it to the penitential regimes of the past: its location among the rituals of Lent and the death-bed, and its connection with the performance of exterior acts of satisfaction.

Satisfaction was certainly not what it had been. The drastic penitential machinery of the earlier Middle Ages had been replaced by a modest regime of prayer and almsdeeds; the seventeenth-century English Catholic priest who imposed on his penitent a satisfaction of three *Paters*, three *Aves*, three Creeds, and the giving of 'three pence to three poor folks' was doing much what his predecessors would have done.⁶ In the thirteenth century, there had been a conflict between those who held that without a penance proportionate to the sin forgiveness was uncertain, and those who wished to ensure universal confession by keeping sacramental penance to a minimum. There had also been a general worry that priests were imposing inadequate penances. But by the fifteenth, it seems to have been accepted that sacramental penance was largely symbolic. Under the influence of Aquinas, the notion made headway that penance was as much 'medicinal', or directed to reforming the future conduct of the sinner, as vindictive, or directed to restoring an objective social balance; the principal orthodox

theologian of Luther's time, Cajetan, could affirm that the medicinal function was the only one that mattered. At the same time, and for the same reasons, the idea that a satisfactory penance was something which could appropriately be performed, for a consideration, by somebody other than the sinner was becoming difficult for theologians to understand. Yet it would not be true to say that by the Reformation all satisfaction was symbolic, or that the average person would have wished it to be so. For him, as for the theologians, *culpa* or guilt was one thing and *poena* or penalty another. As Luther observed in the Ninety-Five Theses of 1517, good Christians still believed firmly in the need to undergo painful penances if their sins were to be forgiven. Hence the depth of popular feeling about Lent, a collective rite by which public penitence had been not so much superseded as consolidated; placed between Carnival and Easter, it was so closely related to confession as to make up a good deal of what was lacking in the satisfactory aspect of the sacrament.

For any healthy and normally occupied adult, Lent was indeed forty days in the wilderness, broken only by an interval in the middle whose popularity indicates the dismal character of the season it alleviated. Veiled from his sight in funereal purple, the friendly figures of Christ, of Mary and the saints were covered and could not be reached for help or consolation; preachers summoned him relentlessly to the distasteful task of contemplating himself. Behind the banner of a gaunt old woman advancing with an exiguous fish on an otherwise bare platter, he went forward to the conquest of his flesh. Admittedly, in the passage from personal ordeal to collective exercise, the penitential machinery had lost some of its teeth. The Christian was no longer forbidden to bear arms, and the machinery of legal dispute did not cease to grind. Married couples were no longer obliged to abstain from intercourse for the whole forty days. Yet considerable vestiges of what had been a rigorous prohibition still remained. There was a ban on intercourse for some days before Easter communion; total Lenten abstinence, though not required by theologians, was still encouraged as an act of devotion, and the original prohibition seems to have been maintained in some dioceses; the parish clergy were not necessarily *au fait* with what the theologians said. Seasonal statistics of conception, when they become available around 1600, suggest that sexual abstinence was quite common. Marriage and

the associated festivities of kinship were prohibited, and most of the brothels were closed.

The fast itself seems by a long way the most deeply ingrained of all the observances of the period. It consisted of an absolute ban, from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday including Sundays, on the eating of meat, to which no qualification was made before the Reformation; and a further ban on what were called white-meats or *lacticinia*, a term which covered any food derived from animals or poultry like milk, butter, cheese and eggs. The Easter egg presumably originated in the days of the larger ban, which seems to have been generally respected until about 1400. Thereafter it was easier to get a dispensation for *lacticinia*, or *Butterbrief*; by the end of the century these were being bought on a scale sufficient to pay for the *Tour de Beurre* of Rouen cathedral and greatly to irritate Luther. The diffusion of the *Butterbrief* may possibly reveal a change in northern cooking habits, and it is not clear that it meant a general decline in lay asceticism. In England north of the Trent white-meats were still taboo at the time of the Reformation, though the south had apparently become more lax. For most people Lent still meant what it had meant to the Catholics of Montaignou around 1300: a diet of vegetables, and of fish if they could afford it, which with the development of the northern fishing industry in the fifteenth century it seems likely that they could. This slimming diet was to be consumed at a single meal, in principle not before nightfall, though popular and monastic hunger had been drawing it inexorably forward towards noon; this seems to have been general practice in the fifteenth century, along with a little something in the evening. Even with these moderations it was quite a rigorous regime, and it obtained, outside Lent, on Fridays, and sometimes Saturdays, three Ember Days every quarter, and the eve of a number of feasts which varied according to their local importance.

This was a domestic observance, one of the few domestic rites which medieval Catholicism possessed. It was naturally more impressive in households whose material circumstances were comparatively easy. But it also meant a great deal to humble people: to the Portuguese driven to eat meat because there was a famine of Lenten victuals, who brought their case to the bishop in considerable disarray; to the woman in Montaignou, fetching her turnips back from the field for an ascetic *déjeuner*, who fell out with a well-

fed heretic on the road; to the poor of Flanders who were allowed milk and eggs at the close of the fifteenth century because fish and vegetables were too dear. Lent meant something to every Catholic householder and his family: sickness and age were not yet regarded as qualifications for relief. Very hard physical work was so regarded, though it is not clear that this made much difference in practice. The only real exceptions were beggars and vagabonds who had no reliable means of support and no fixed abode. The compromises of the lax were balanced by the austerities of those who fasted more than they were obliged to do. From the fifteenth century to the seventeenth, in England, France and the Netherlands, they abstained from alcoholic drink (which had long since ceased to be an obligation), ate nothing but bread and water for the whole of Lent, added fasting Wednesdays to fasting Fridays, waited until nightfall to break their fast. In Flanders it was held that a voluntary fast on bread and water of twelve consecutive Fridays was an assured means of salvation.

In the long run (if Luther was the long run) the ever more intense concentration of mind and feelings on the reality of the satisfactory sufferings of Christ would probably reduce the pressure on the devout to pacify God by a superabundance of penitential acts. In the short run, it had the opposite effect. The traditional 'common penance' of pilgrimage, though not quite what it had been in the time of the Crusades, was still a more daunting event than might be gathered from Chaucer's civilised example. It was the one physical penance which might still be imposed by a priest in confession, and in regions of more rigorous practice like the north of England Catholics could still be found in 1700 at holy wells and springs, kneeling up to their necks in icy water to say their penitential prayers, probably for fornication. The hazards of the long-range pilgrimages to St James at Compostela and Our Lady at Rocamadour, from seasickness upwards, were such as to make them a satisfaction acceptable to the victims of violence or their friends; in northern France and the Netherlands an agreement on the offender's part to make such a pilgrimage was a standard feature in the arbitration of disputes. It is hard to know whether these judicial pilgrims were more numerous than those who went spontaneously to fulfil their vows, redeem their sins, see the Holy Places, visit their name-saints, claim indulgences, or have a change of air. Whatever their motives, they passed on setting out into the

same official condition of liminality or weightlessness which marked, like baptismal exorcism or Lent, the passage from past profanity towards future holiness. I see no reason to suppose that a practice which has thrived during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was on its last legs in the fifteenth. It was not very popular with the authorities, secular or spiritual, who had their reasons for wishing people to stay at home; during the century from Gerson to Erasmus it suffered from a rise of domestic piety and the increasing impatience with symbolic behaviour of the learned. In popular devotion it had to compete with the urge towards a more realistic and dramatic identification with the sufferings of Christ, which in Italy from the middle of the fourteenth century had taken the form of collective flagellation.

Launched as a more satisfying version of pilgrimage in an atmosphere much like that of the early Crusades, the flagellant movement fulfilled in a collective way the principal function of judicial pilgrimage: it attempted, by representing the patience of Christ in the hands of his enemies, to effect the subjugation of the passions of hostility and to procure peace and reconciliation among Christians. For some flagellants the practice of their discipline became a vehicle for the satisfaction of sin manifestly superior to sacramental penance, and the papacy condemned them for the opinion at the close of the fourteenth century. But their drift was superorthodoxy rather than heresy, scarcely differing except by its publicity from the hair-shirts of such as Thomas More. They certainly failed to dislodge conventional pilgrimage, and their fashion had passed, at least in Italy, by the mid-fifteenth century; thereafter their institutions, the orthodox fraternities of *disciplinati* and the like, successfully developed a less heroic mode of devotion which combined symbolic discipline with actual charity.

Flagellation might rise and fall: it seems to have risen in Spain as it was declining in Italy; but the conviction that visible satisfaction was essential for the pacification of God and one's neighbour had not weakened by the sixteenth century. The miller Menocchio, who thought that the only purpose of going to confession was to discover the appropriate satisfaction for one's sin, and that there was no need for it if you could find this out otherwise, spoke for a level of instinct too deep to be reached by Erasmus's elegant proof that this was not what the gospels meant. This is the first thing to be borne in mind when thinking about the penitential issue most in

evidence on the eve of the Reformation: the issue of indulgences. For questions about indulgence were questions about satisfaction. The institution had its origins in the earlier regime of public penance, and the term applied to the remission, diminution or conversion of the penal satisfaction imposed on the sinner in the course of his readmission to the community of the Church. It also covered the undertaking by the Church to offer its prayers or *suffragia* to God that he would likewise be reconciled. It represented charity in the courts of penitential justice, and continued to represent it after the system of public penance had decayed.

By 1400 various other things had happened to indulgence. It had become attached to a variety of works, of which the most important was the crusade, but including public improvements like bridge- or church-building; it had become established that these works could be performed by proxy, or commuted for money; the granting of it had become in effect a papal monopoly; and in answer to the objection that sins could not be forgiven for which satisfaction had not been made, theologians like Aquinas had come up with the notion of the treasury of the Church. The idea in itself was a reasonable deduction from a feature of the early medieval penitential system which Anselm had evoked in his doctrine of the Redemption. Satisfactory penance due from one person could be made by another, provided the relation between the two parties was sufficiently intimate that what was done by one of them could be taken, by God and by the Church, as being done by the other. The idea of transferable merit was not stretched by the assumption that the sufferings of Christ were sufficient to make up for any possible amount of satisfaction which the sins of Christians might require; and not stretched very much by the argument that the saints in heaven and the meritorious faithful on earth could assist the sinner by passing over to him the merit they had acquired by satisfaction in excess of their own needs. The second point was disputed, for the doctrine of vicarious satisfaction seemed to imply that the transfer of merit could only be effective where there was a particular relation of charity or kinship; but nobody could really argue with the first. From the popes' point of view the doctrine of the treasury of the Church, once discovered, meant that no limit could be assigned to their power to remit satisfactory penalties.

Indulgence was therefore not a substitute for sacramental

penance: it assumed that the sinner was repentant and had confessed his sins, and simply enabled him to forgo the penitential act imposed. In its earlier phases it was a positive incentive for people to confess their sins; by the fifteenth century the rule was that the obligation could be met by normal annual confession in the year preceding the granting of indulgence, which helped to meet the widespread anxiety about dying without the opportunity to confess. Nor, though it upset theologians, was there really much of a problem in the wording of later indulgences, which added the remission of *culpa* or guilt to that of *poena* or satisfaction: in thinking about indulgences people were thinking about *poena*, and the general view was that if you looked after the *poena* the *culpa* would look after itself. The real difficulty was created by the decline of the satisfactory element in sacramental penance, which appeared to take away the motive for seeking indulgence, but in fact supplied a different and perhaps stronger one. Since it implied that reckoning for sin would be postponed from this life to the next, it naturally created a demand for indulgence in respect of the pains of purgatory. The popes from 1300 onwards seem to have had no doubt that their power as custodians of the treasure of the Church extended to purgatory; it was therefore their duty as well as their pleasure to add indulgence to the existing modes of prayer and sacrifice by which the living performed their obligations to the souls of the dead. The unofficial provision of such indulgences, practised in particular by the Franciscans of Assisi, was finally regularised when the Franciscan Pope Sixtus IV in 1476 granted a model indulgence, for anyone contributing to the rebuilding of the church at Saintes in western France, of absolute remission from the pains of purgatory to kindred and friends suffering there. The model served for the multitude of similar indulgences granted during the next half-century. It is hard to blame preachers of indulgences for telling their hearers that when their money dropped in the box a soul of their choice would fly up to heaven. This arresting image was not invented by Johan Tetzel during his fateful tour of Germany in 1517, but was a commonplace which had already been condemned by the Sorbonne in 1482; the indulgence he was selling, ostensibly for the rebuilding of St Peter's in Rome, was in fact rather cautiously phrased, though not much notice was taken of this in preaching it. Its author, Pope Leo X, had already brought theory into line with practice by stating that in respect of

their qualification for indulgences there was no difference at all between the living and the dead.

There were several reasons for objecting to this development. Bishops and clergy objected because it seemed likely to undercut masses for the dead and deprive them of much of their income; theologians because they wanted to maintain some kind of connection with the historic *suffragia*, and had never been quite convinced that the pope had jurisdiction over the souls in purgatory. They raised the rhetorical question why, since the pope could liberate souls from purgatory, he did not liberate them all at once. Luther's Ninety-Five Theses were a compendium of such complaints, and though it is anachronistic to think of them as the start of the Reformation, they did touch something more fundamental about the disarray of Catholicism than it has recently been usual to believe. One can sympathise with the Renaissance popes for finding the simultaneous claims of humanity and profit too strong to resist, and for doing their bit, as they saw it, to further the salvation of souls. I doubt if one can acquit them of Luther's charge of irresponsibly playing about with the penitential instinct. It did not cement the solidarity of the Church when the civilised Leo X, who thought satisfaction for sin a barbarous anachronism, scattered remission for punishments in which he did not believe in front of a population persuaded that sin would always have to be paid for in one way or another.