

which had at least as much in common with these 'marginal' elements as with official Judaism. In other words, we do not need to say that Our Lord followed the calendar of Qumran; all we need to say is that we now know there was such a calendar, that it may well have been current in other places besides the Qumran community, and that Our Lord may have followed this body of opinion which preferred the ancient priestly calendar to the later official civil calendar. It must be admitted, however, that the words 'may be' occur rather too often in such an explanation for us to be quite certain about it.

A second point on which we would like further explanation is the question of intercalated days. Even in our year of 365 days we have to insert an extra day every few years in order to make up for the fact that the year is actually slightly longer than 365 days. In a year of 364 days the difference between the days and the seasons of the year would become more noticeable even more quickly than in our year. This would be of particular importance in a calendar which was meant to preserve the regularity of the liturgical feasts, when those feasts were so closely connected with the seasons. If the year were computed inflexibly according to 364 days, there would come a time when they were celebrating the offering of first fruits before the seed was even sown. Moreover, if they were to preserve the regularity of the recurring days (New Year's day always falling on the same day of the week), it could not be a question of inserting merely one day, as we do in our calendar. At least a complete week, if not a complete month, would have to be inserted. Now we have as yet no information how or when this was done. Therefore, in spite of the apparent mathematical certainty of the computation of the Qumran calendar, we cannot be absolutely sure of the occurrence of any given feast in any given year. We know that the Pasch, the 15th Nisan, would certainly be a Wednesday; but we do not know if it would necessarily be in the same week as the official Jewish 15th Nisan.

For the moment, then, this theory must remain no more than a very attractive possibility.

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*Ushaw*

## THE REMISSION OF SINS—II

4 *Remission of sins through penitential practices* Judging by the writings of the early fathers it seems undeniable that the question of how the grave sins committed after Baptism were to be forgiven created something of a dilemma; not, be it clearly stated, in the sense

that the answer to that question was not to be found in Divine Revelation, but in so far as new circumstances always create dilemmas for those who have not fully penetrated the wonderful plan of God's salvation through Christ. There must have been many who long before St Augustine said much the same as he: 'Since we have to live in this world, in which life without sin is impossible, the remission of sins does not consist solely in the washing of holy Baptism.'<sup>1</sup> But for the early church, so devoted to the Sacred Scriptures, there was clear guidance to be found in the Old Testament,<sup>2</sup> and they were not slow to realise it.

Throughout the Old Testament we read of God's chosen people falling into sin, turning away from God and suffering the consequences. And there is the spectacle of God's continually forgiving them their sins and restoring them to their privileged position as His own personal possession among all the peoples of the earth (cf. Exod. 19:5). The similarity between the sinful Israelite and the sinful Christian is clear. Both were members of God's chosen people: the former because he had been incorporated through circumcision into Israel, whom God had led out from Egypt and established in Canaan, united to Himself by the Covenant and enjoying the privileges of being His chosen people; the latter because he had been incorporated through Baptism into Christ, the Son of God in whom is salvation. If then the Israelites of old had been reinstated after they had sinned, then surely the new Israelites could hope for the same mercy; and the Old Testament described time and time again the way in which this reconciliation with God had been effected. Time and again the Israelites had returned to God and been restored to His favour by acknowledging their sinfulness and carrying out various penitential practices. In the Old Testament the Christians found the answer, God's own answer, to their question, 'What can we do, we who have received Baptism once and for all but have since turned away from Thee? What must we do in order that we may regain our place in Thy kingdom?' In order to enter the Kingdom in the first instance they had been told by John, by Our Lord, by the Apostles, 'Turn

<sup>1</sup> Serm. 213,8 (P.L. 38, 1064)

<sup>2</sup> This is an example, only one of many, of the essential part the *Old Testament* has played in the development of Christian theology. We do not mean to imply that the New Testament ignores the practice of penance, but there is no doubt that the Old Testament makes the more considerable contribution. An examination of textual readings with reference to fasting, for instance, is interesting and perhaps significant—cf. Matt. 17:21 (absent from *Vaticanus* and others, accepted by Merk (2nd edn 1935) but rejected by *Bible de Jérusalem*); Mark 9:29; Acts 10:30; 1 Cor. 7:5. Are these additions to be explained simply by appealing to encratite influence and not, partly at least, to the development of a penitential theology within the Church, of which the encratite heresy itself was an exaggeration?

back<sup>1</sup> and be baptised for the remission of sins.' Now the answer to their question was that they must turn back, be converted, in the manner of the Israelites: a turning to God in sackcloth and ashes, a conversion accompanied by penitential practices. 'Be converted' now became synonymous with 'Do penance.'<sup>2</sup>

The theological significance of penitential practices is not easily demonstrated to everyone's satisfaction, and it seems worthwhile to re-examine the teaching of the Old Testament. But it is essential to bear in mind the Biblical concept of sin,<sup>3</sup> which must be regarded as the foundation of a theology of penitence. According to the Scriptures all evils are the effects and therefore the manifestations of sin; and there is no sharp distinction between material evils and spiritual evils. This is the implication of two fundamental articles of faith: that God created the earth and all the fulness of it, making all things good; and secondly, that Yahweh is the one and the all-powerful God, with nothing beyond His control. These two articles of faith were confronted with the fact that there were many evils in the world, such as poverty, disease, war, famine, drought and death. Only one explanation held good on the lips of a people to whom the subtleties of Greek philosophy were unknown: these evils were, as everything else, in the hand of God: they must be under His control. Yet God was supremely good. These evils then could only be the just punishment of sin, and all suffering was the result of sin, and indeed the external proof of sin. Fasting, the wearing of sackcloth, the sprinkling of ashes upon the head, the renting of garments, the shedding of tears were all practices adopted by the Israelites in times of distress when they turned to God to beg for relief. But the distress, whatever it was, was the result of sin; in turning to God for relief, therefore, they were always and inevitably turning to God for forgiveness of their sins.

There are many examples of such practices. Thus, for instance, when King Achab heard of the murder of Naboth 'he rent his garments, put on sackcloth, even next his skin, fasted, slept in sackcloth and walked slowly' (1 Kings 21:27). The king, accustomed to wear fine linen, to dine sumptuously and to sleep in his ivory-encrusted bed, takes on the role of the poorest beggar to be seen outside his palace gate, clothed in the roughest of garments, emaciated and dragging himself along with painful steps. The evil of Naboth's murder had

<sup>1</sup> According to Behm it is useless to seek the N.T. meaning of *metanoiein* from Greek sources (cf. *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, iv, 976, 15). This is not to deny that a change of mind or heart is included within the N.T. significance, but it implies all that is contained within the prophetic use of *šûb*, to turn back, to return, or, as we might say, to be converted (cf. *ibid.* 994, 31).

<sup>2</sup> Notice how the translation of *metanoiein* and *metanoia* fluctuates between 'repent' and 'do penance' in the various versions.

<sup>3</sup> cf. T. Worden 'The Meaning of "Sin"', in *Scripture*, ix (1957), pp. 44-53

not actually caused him to be reduced to this physical state. Achab could have continued his regal life in such a way that the onlookers would have said, no evil has befallen him. But Achab knew better ; he knew that by his sin evil had really befallen him, and he wished to acknowledge and proclaim it as best he could before God and his people. The latter learned of his sin when he appeared as a penitent ; God, who reads the heart, already knew, but He was waiting for that clear acknowledgement of it which would not only move Him to pity, but which would provide Him with the opportunity of manifesting to His people His power and His mercy. And by his penitence Achab won God's forgiveness : ' Because he has humiliated himself before me, I will bring no evil (upon his house) during his time ' (1 Kings 21:29).

The consequences of sin afflict the whole community, and Israel had a vivid sense of the common responsibility. Thus, for instance, Palestine was invaded by locusts. If modern experience is a reliable guide, this was not in itself a very unusual occurrence, but it naturally brought distress and famine. Since God is Lord of all things, then He must have sent the locusts ; but He could not have done this if the people had not sinned. They must therefore beg His forgiveness, and to do so they must approach Him in the full display of their wretchedness :

Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth. . . . Be confounded, O tillers of the soil ; wail, O vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field has perished. The vine withers, the fig tree languishes. . . . Gird on sackcloth and lament, O priests, wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God. . . . Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders, and all the inhabitants of the land, to the house of Yahweh your God, and cry to Yahweh. . . . Unto Thee, Yahweh, I cry. For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flame has burned all the trees of the field. Even the wild beasts cry to Thee because the water brooks are dried up and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness. Blow the trumpet in Sion ; sound the alarm on My holy mountain ! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of Yahweh is coming. . . . Who shall endure it ? Yet even now, says Yahweh, return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning ; and rend your hearts and not your garments. (Joel 1:8-2:13.)

Thus the people who were beginning to suffer from the effects of the plague and already going hungry were called upon to accentuate the signs of their distress before the Lord. When God looked upon them in their wretchedness, hungry, weeping, clothed like beggars, and heard their cry : ' Pity, Yahweh, for Thy people ! ' then He must surely have mercy. In actual fact He once more showed mercy to them : ' Look, I am sending you grain, wine and oil, and you will be satisfied ' (2:19).

Again, the Jews after the return from exile sinned grievously by marrying outside their own race. In Nehemias ch. 9 we read of how they begged from God forgiveness for their sins. Clothed in sackcloth and with dirt upon their heads they gathered together for a fast. Standing there in their misery they sang of all the wonderful deeds God had accomplished for them in the past. Again, when Judith sought God's help against the enemies of her people, she fell flat upon her face, scattered ashes upon her head, uncovered the sackcloth she was wearing, and with a loud voice cried to the Lord (Judith 9:1). In the same way Daniel, lamenting the desolation of Jerusalem, turned his face to God, seeking Him by prayer and supplications with fasting and sackcloth and ashes (Dan. 9:3). The voluntary adopting of these penitential practices is the regular accompaniment to prayer in time of distress, whether an explicit acknowledgement of sin be included or not. There is no indication that by afflicting themselves with fasting, sackcloth and ashes the Israelites thought that this suffering 'satisfied' or 'placated' God, or that it was required as compensation for some abstract balance of justice. They did recognise that the evils they were suffering against their will, whether famine or war or anything else, had been justly inflicted upon them by God, and that they were a just punishment for sin. They did recognise that in order to gain an end of the evils caused by their sins they must placate God's wrath and prevail upon Him to 'turn away His anger.' But this is not the same thing as saying that they thought of voluntarily inflicted sufferings as 'satisfying' Him, for the appeal was not to God's justice but to His fidelity to His promises, to His love and compassion. Their references to these penitential practices are not in terms of 'Let them placate Thee: let them make satisfaction to Thee,' but rather, 'Look at our wretchedness and have mercy; see how we suffer and be moved to pity.' It must not be forgotten that these practices were a sincere avowal of sinfulness, and that they were the mark of repentance, for they were only adopted when the people returned to Yahweh to seek His help after having gone astray. Their purpose was to move God to pity, so that He would forgive them their sins by removing the evils that afflicted them.

Some may find this dramatic display of their miseries rather distasteful. They may ask whether there be any reason for dressing in sackcloth, for fasting, especially in those cases when famine was in any case making them go hungry. Why the need for tears and groanings? Are these things necessary to win God's compassion? Does He not already know of their misery without its being thus paraded before Him? Have we here an example of primitive practice which further enlightenment has discredited? This objection is indeed

a fundamental one, and is not to be answered by referring to the primitiveness of the Old Testament. Christianity, the true heir of Israel, has also its dramatic display: the element of drama is as fundamental to Christianity as are the Sacraments. These penitential practices are not mere 'play-acting.' Such appearances were the outward manifestations of their real wretchedness. And they were wretched not because of murder or locusts or war or drought, but because they had offended God. If they had been wretched merely because of these 'natural' causes, they would simply have taken steps to alleviate their wretchedness as much as possible; they would have kept up appearances, they would have eaten whatever food the famine left them. It was only when they voluntarily displayed the effects of these evils, it was only when, hungry though they were they fasted, poor though they were they rent their garments and put on sackcloth, it was only then that the signs of misery became significant for their purpose. It is perfectly true that external appearances may at times be nothing more than play-acting, and the prophets warned them of this. 'Why have we fasted and Thou seest it not? Why have we humbled ourselves and Thou takest no knowledge of it? Behold in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure and oppress all your workers. Behold you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a rush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to Yahweh?' (Is. 58:3-5). The purpose of penitential practices is to come into God's presence suffering and in need; but to fast when there is no real turning away from sin makes a mockery of their protestations of dependence upon Him; He who sins does not believe that God alone can free him from wretchedness (cf. Zach. 7:9-10).

Penitential practices were the outward manifestations of sin because they were the outward manifestation of the results of sin. To the Israelites the poor man's rags, the drawn face of the hungry, the dirt of the neglected, the tears of the mourner, the diseases of the sick were all evils. They were therefore one and all the result of sin. To say that the poverty was due to a recent war, or the hunger to the failure of last season's rains, or the neglect to the death of parents, or the skin disease to the lack of fresh vegetables, none of these explanations would in any way change the Israelites' belief that the ultimate cause was sin. They were not ignorant of these reasons: they knew that they must till the land and conserve their water supply if they were to have sufficient food; they knew that they must practise hygiene to avoid

the ravages of disease ; they knew that they must defend their frontiers from pillaging armies if they were to avoid poverty and destruction. They knew and they did all these things : they were a civilised people living in a civilised part of the world. But they nevertheless believed, as God Himself had taught them to believe, that hunger, thirst, disease and pain were evils, and that no evil which has ever afflicted man has done so independently of sin.

But still we have not answered the difficulty, of the need of such display when it was God's pity they sought. Is not this penitential practice, calculated to move the heart, all too human a manner of behaving when God is the One we petition ? The answer is to be found in the Scriptures where the more fundamental purpose of penitence is seen. The Israelites realised clearly that the only way whereby God can be known by men is through His works ; and so they realised the importance of every scrap of visible, tangible evidence of God's merciful interventions, and they consequently realised the value of underlining that evidence. The purpose of their penitential practices was not only to move God to pity, though this human way of looking at things is perfectly legitimate ; but more fundamentally, it was to underline the power and the love of God displayed in His act of deliverance. To put it somewhat bluntly, their penitential practices were intended to make the setting all the more sombre, in order that God's rescue might stand out all the more clearly and convincingly, and thus strengthen their faith and confidence in His love and mercy for them. All external religion is a divine pedagogy, and this is no accidental or dispensable feature ; it is essential precisely because we cannot know God except in His works among us.

That the Israelites realised this purpose is clear from another and at first sight surprising feature of their penitential practices. Their prayers on these occasions did not begin with cries for mercy but with hymns of praise for all God's wonderful deeds in the past. Thus in Nehemias 9 we read how the people recalled the choosing of Abraham, the rescue from Egypt, the giving of the Law on Sinai, the manna in the desert and the giving of the promised land. It was not as though they had deserved these things ; but even when they had rebelled in the past, God had not abandoned them. Whilst it was true that He had given them into the hand of their enemies when they had sinned, He had rescued them when they had cried out to Him. We find the same in Judith 9 and Daniel 9. These past deeds are the guarantee that God, unchangeably faithful, will act in the same way now, since the opportunity presents itself once more. We are, perhaps, sometimes shocked at the way in which the Israelites asked God to act 'for His own sake,' as though there were some suggestion that God acts from

motives of vainglory. But in reality it is a request that God manifest Himself to the world, and God takes away their distress explicitly for this motive: 'to make Thy name known to Thy adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at Thy presence' (Is. 64:2). Judith ends her prayer: 'And make known to every nation and to every tribe that Thou art Yahweh, God of all power and might, and that the people of Israel has no other protector but Him' (Judith 9:14). God's answer to Israel's prayer for deliverance from the plague of locusts emphasises the same idea: 'You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of Yahweh your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And My people shall never again be put to shame. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, Yahweh, am your God and there is none else. And My people shall never again be put to shame' (Joel 2:26-7). Daniel's prayer reminds God of the same motive: 'Yahweh, give heed and act; delay not, for Thy own sake, O my God, because Thy city and Thy people are called by Thy name' (Dan. 9:19). The greater the deed and the more spectacular, then the more effective a revelation of God to man it is. And that is why the forgiving of sin and the overcoming of evil are manifestations of God and are to His glory. The deliverance of Israel from Egypt, the rescuing of them from Babylon, the preservation of the people from the locusts, the saving them from famine and drought, these are all examples of God's power over evil; they were object lessons and for this reason they were presented in dramatic form. Thus their prayer, having begun with a confession of God's greatness, having continued with the confession of their own wretchedness, so often ends with the promise that they will confess God's greatness all the more in the time to come, when they will have a further example of His love to which they may refer. The pedagogical purpose is only attained when God does intervene to rescue them from their misery, and change their grief into joy, their poverty into riches, their famine into abundance. And the Old Testament recounts such acts of God time and again. Penitential practices were never considered as something complete in themselves: they were always means to an end, an end which seems twofold: the forgiveness of sin and the glory of God, but which is in reality one: the glory of God made manifest in the forgiveness of sin. And the manifestation was more brilliant when the sinfulness to be cured by God was more vividly shown forth in penitential sufferings.

5 *Remission of sins through the sacrament of Penance* It is necessary to understand the true significance of penitential practices because they did not lose this significance when they were adopted by the Church

as the means whereby she should exercise the power given her by Christ of forgiving sins. The essential task of the Church is to impart and increase the life of Christ, and the sacraments are the seven ways in which she fulfils her task. Thus sinners who have lost the life of Christ given to them in Baptism are offered that life a second time, provided they ask for it as penitents : in sackcloth and ashes, with supplications and with fastings, provided, that is, they realise and acknowledge that they are suffering the effects of sin, and stand in need of God's merciful intervention. The sinner may, for instance, confess that he committed adultery : he is guilty of an action which took place a day or a year ago ; but he can as accurately confess that he is now, at this very moment, suffering the evil effects of such an action, and this wretched condition may well be displayed by his penitential garb. When a man says that he broke his leg two days ago, he could as well say that he *has* a broken leg *now*, were this not superfluous, since the effects of his action are there for all to see. But the manifestations of sin are not so clear or so definite. It is therefore necessary to adopt certain signs of its presence, if the healing power of God's mercy is to be made plain, and His glory to be enhanced.

In the attitude of the early Christian writers towards the practice of penance we see the influence of the Old Testament (though it is clear that other factors played their part, such as Stoic philosophy and Roman jurisprudence), and the two motives of strengthening the sinner's plea for forgiveness and the pedagogical benefit to the community of the faithful are not difficult to find. Thus Tertullian writes, after having admitted that the gate of forgiveness, though shut and fastened up with the bar of Baptism, is nevertheless standing somewhat open through repentance :

The narrower, then, the sphere of action of this second and only remaining repentance, the more laborious is its probation ; in order that it may not be exhibited in the conscience alone, but may likewise be carried out in some external act. This act, which is more usually expressed and commonly spoken of under a Greek name, is *exomologesis*, whereby we confess our sins to the Lord, not indeed as if He were ignorant of them, but inasmuch as by confession satisfaction is settled ; of confession repentance is born ; by repentance God is appeased. And thus *exomologesis* is a discipline for man's prostration and humiliation, enjoining a demeanour calculated to move mercy. With regard also to the very dress and food, it commands the penitent to lie in sackcloth and ashes, to cover his body in mourning, to lay his spirit low in sorrows, to exchange for severe treatments the sins which he has committed ; moreover, to know no food and drink but such as is plain—not for the stomach's sake, to wit, but the soul's ; for the most part, however, to feed prayers on fastings, to groan, to weep and roar unto the Lord your God ; to roll before the feet of the presbyters and kneel to God's dear ones ; to enjoin on all the brethren to be ambassadors to bear his deprecatory supplication before God. All this *exomologesis* does, that it may enhance repentance ; may honour God by its fear of the incurred danger ; may, by itself pronouncing against the sinner stand in the stead of God's

indignation and by temporal mortification (I will not say frustrate, but) discharge eternal punishment.<sup>1</sup>

Origen also speaks of the possible edification for the rest, when a sinner confesses his sin in the gathering of the whole Church.<sup>2</sup> And the pedagogical element in penitential practice was strongly marked in the early Church, by the fact that the penitent sinner was at the door of the church for all to see. God's intervention, His forgiveness and His mercy were equally plain, for the community witnessed the reconciliation of the sinner by the bishop, the readmission into the Church and especially his readmission to the delights of the Lord's table.

Both by excluding the sinner from the life<sup>3</sup> of the Church and by readmitting him as a penitent, the bishop was exercising the power given by Christ to the apostles when he said: 'Whatever you may bind upon earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you may loose upon earth will be loosed in heaven' (Matt. 18:18). The interpretation of this saying, which is practically identical with what had been said to Peter alone (Matt. 16:19), has always caused considerable difficulty. What is the meaning of 'to bind and loose'? It was a rabbinic expression, used to describe their teaching authority: they could declare certain beliefs or practices forbidden (i.e. bound) and others lawful (i.e. loosed) according to the Law. In this case, then, Our Lord would be giving Peter and the rest of the apostles divine authority to support them in their teaching regarding what was allowed or forbidden by God. As an objection to this interpretation Büchsel<sup>4</sup> points to Matt. 23:8 where the disciples are admonished not to accept the title Rabbi, for 'you have only one teacher,' and he calls attention to another possible meaning of 'to bind and loose,' namely 'to put under a bann and to remove the bann, or to expel from the community and to readmit.' The evidence for such a meaning is slight and Büchsel admits that one cannot go further than to say that it is a probable interpretation of the texts in Matthew. But this may already be too definite. The object of the binding and loosing is

<sup>1</sup> 'On Repentance,' ch. ix, *Anti-Nicene Christian Library*, xi, Edinburgh MDCCCLXIX, p. 273

<sup>2</sup> In Ps. 37 Hom. ii, 6, edition De la Rue, viii, p. 100

<sup>3</sup> It must be clearly understood that such expressions as 'expulsion from the Church,' or 'exclusion from the kingdom,' or 'to cease to be a member of the Church' are all references to the living or fruitful membership. The baptised sinner *does* remain a member of the Church in so far as he retains a title to membership: he has been stamped, as it were, with an indelible mark at Baptism, and his situation in relation to the Church is not the same as that of one unbaptised. The condemnation of the practice of rebaptising heretics was a tremendous stimulus to the development of a more elaborate theology concerning the nature and effects of the Sacraments, and in particular of that most important distinction between validity and fruitfulness. Thus St Augustine taught that sinners and heretics may have a certain participation with Christ, even though it be imperfect. For this vital development in the understanding of the nature of the Sacraments cf. Bernard Leeming, S.J., *Principles of Sacramental Theology*, London 1956, nn. 135-53.

<sup>4</sup> *Theol. Wört.*, ii, 60, 8 ff.

things, not people,<sup>1</sup> and the context of this expression in Matt. 16:19 where Peter is made the head of the Church favours the retaining of its normal meaning as a conferring of doctrinal authority. On the other hand, the context of Matt. 18:18 is precisely that of fraternal correction, of the relation between sinner and community. If a brother sin he is to be rebuked before witnesses; but if he refuse to listen the community is to be informed, and if even then he refuse to listen he is to be as a pagan or a publican, namely one excluded from the community. Here the context does seem to favour the interpretation of to bind and loose as to expel from and readmit to the community, and K. Stendahl remarks with some probability: 'It may not be taken for granted that the saying is intended to have the same function in both contexts. On the contrary, its repetition in ch. 18 is due to the fact that Matthew intends to alter its implications.'<sup>2</sup> But it seems possible to reconcile the two interpretations more simply. Judging by the formula used in both cases, the direct meaning is indeed that Peter and the rest of the apostles are given the authority of deciding what doctrine and what moral conduct is permitted and forbidden in God's kingdom. The Scribes and Pharisees had claimed a similar authority for their interpretations of the Law, and in practice by their interpretations they had closed the kingdom of heaven to men (Matt. 23:13). In the same way the authority given the apostles of preaching the authentic gospel, must also in practice include the authority of excluding from and readmitting to the kingdom which they preach.<sup>3</sup> The interpretation of this text, therefore, from the time of Tertullian<sup>4</sup> and Origen,<sup>5</sup> as a reference to the power of the bishop to exclude<sup>6</sup> and readmit sinners to the Church, must not be considered as alien to its original context; nor, on the other hand, as directly stated there; but rather, as an important element included in the full doctrinal authority given to the apostles by Christ. If the belief or conduct of a Christian deviate from what is taught by the apostles, then he is no longer a member of the kingdom; if he correct this, then he regains his position in the kingdom. But the kingdom of God is a visible community and every aspect of life in the kingdom has its

<sup>1</sup> The examples Büchsel quotes, namely John 7:39; 10:29; 17:2, 24, to show that this use of the neuter causes no difficulty are quite unconvincing.

<sup>2</sup> *The School of St Matthew*, Uppsala 1954, p. 28

<sup>3</sup> J. Jeremias points out that the rabbinic use of this expression ought not to lead us to ignore completely its origin as signifying the autocratic power of a judge to take prisoner and to release (cf. *Theol. Wört.*, III, 751, 1 ff.).

<sup>4</sup> An interpretation he himself rejected, at least in so far as it was considered to have been handed down to the successors of Peter (cf. *Scripture*, IX (1957), p. 66, fn. 3).

<sup>5</sup> *Comm. in Matt.* 12:14

<sup>6</sup> 'Exclusion' from the Church is not to be restricted in this context to the significance of 'excommunication' in the technical sense it now has in the Canon Law.

visible side : the kingdom is preached by the apostles, and its members are admitted by the visible sign of Baptism, which is the manifestation of their invisible belief in the gospel. So too, their deviation from that belief, and their subsequent reacceptance of it, must be made visible.

The expulsion from the Church and the later readmission of the penitent sinner is the sacramental rite whereby sins are forgiven, for the former is the external proof that the man is in the state of sin, and the latter that he is reconciled to the body of Christ and reinstated in the kingdom of God. The grave mistake is sometimes made of regarding expulsion from the Church and readmittance as a purely disciplinary measure, without direct reference to a man's state in relation to God. But this shows a misunderstanding of the significance of the Church as the gathering of those who are saved and who together form the one body of Christ in whom alone is salvation. In the rite of public penitence according to the *Pontificale Romanum* the bishop said to the sinners he was expelling : ' Thus you are, today, driven from your holy mother the Church, on account of your sins and your crimes, as Adam the first man was driven from paradise on account of his sin.'<sup>1</sup> Their penitential garb and particularly their exclusion from the Holy Eucharist made this truth quite obvious to the community, made the penitents themselves realise their unhappy state and their need to seek forgiveness, and made their eventual reconciliation a striking proof of God's merciful intervention, a display of His love ' Who willest not the death of a sinner, but rather that he be converted and live ' (cf. Ezech. 33:11). It is in such a context that we understand the full implication of the parables of the lost sheep, the lost drachma and the prodigal son<sup>2</sup> : ' There will be more joy in heaven for one sinner who repents, than for ninety-nine just who need not repent ' (Luke 15:7).

It may well be thought that a theological consideration of the remission of sins through Penance which shows so great a dependence upon the practice of the early Church, is proved unsound by the fact that most of these practices have been abandoned by the Church, and are therefore unessential for the preservation of this sacrament. Great changes in the actual rite of Penance have taken place for various reasons which can only be appreciated in a careful study of liturgical history. But it is not correct to conclude that the superficial differences, great though they seem, imply that the theological significance of the sacrament more clearly expressed in ancient practice, does not remain the same today. The absence of sackcloth and ashes, of fasting and weeping, is the reason why the name Penance seems something of a

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by A. Villien, *Les Sacrements : Histoire et Liturgie*, 3e ed., Paris 1931, p. 167

<sup>2</sup> cf. S. Lyonnet, *Biblica*, 1954, p. 484

misnomer, but the name Confession draws attention to that element in the sacramental rite which plays the same part as penitential practices. The explicit confession of sins to the priest is the essential penitential practice demanded by the Church except in those circumstances in which, from the earliest days, the Church has been accustomed to dispense with penitential practices. The confession of sins is the sinner's declaration of the evils which have come upon him through sin, and it is his public humiliation. Through this humiliation the sinner moves God to pity and displays his miserable state to the Church. The confessor is the officially appointed witness on behalf of the Church, and the confession of sins, in spite of the secrecy of the confessional, still remains, essentially, a public one before the Church. But more important, the confessor is the officially appointed representative of the apostles in the sinner's reconciliation, and it is here that the drama is completed, for by this reconciliation God shows His mercy and changes the sinner's sickness into health, a wonderful work of God which is crowned before the eyes of the brethren when the sinner is once more united to them at the reception of the Holy Eucharist. A sure theological instinct joins confession and communion in the minds of the faithful, for the Holy Eucharist is the supreme proof that we are members of the Body of Christ.

The remission of sins therefore, obtained fundamentally through union with Christ, is in practice granted through two sacraments : to those who do not already belong to the Church it is given by Baptism which makes them members of the Body of Christ ; to those who have already been baptised it is given by Penance whereby they are reconciled to the Church, or in synonymous terms, readmitted into the Body of Christ. This is wonderfully expressed in the prayer at the reconciliation of penitents, which took place shortly before the baptism of catechumens at the Paschal Vigil : ' Our number grows through those to be reborn ; we increase through those who have returned. There is washing with water ; there is washing with tears. From the first there is joy at the receiving of those called ; from the second there is gladness at the absolution of the penitent. . . . They have eaten, as it is written, the bread of sorrow ; they have watered their bed with tears, they have afflicted their heart with mourning, their body with fastings, in order that they might gain the wholeness of soul they had lost.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> cf. A. Villien, *op. cit.*, p. 169