

A Case Study of Scholasticism: Peter Abelard and Peter Lombard on Penance

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ULRICH LEINSLE BEGINS his *Introduction to Scholastic Theology* with an attempt to define scholasticism over the course of fifteen pages, only coming to conclude that “an unequivocal definition of ‘Scholasticism’ does not seem possible.”¹ This lack of clarity has a simple explanation. Though sometimes seen as a smooth monolithic structure unaffected by the confines of time, medieval scholasticism can be more appropriately imaged as an ongoing debate spanning centuries, a debate that would greatly affect the future of Christian theology. The increasing desire to rationally articulate the faith alongside the ongoing development of sacramental traditions meant that attempts to express theologies of the sacraments provided some of the most heated and nuanced scholastic debates. Penance was no exception, reaching a developmental turning-point in the twelfth-century, particularly when considered by two of the most prominent theologians and “pioneers of sacramental theology” of the time—Peter Abelard and Peter Lombard.²

Because an adequate theology of the sacrament was only beginning to be formulated during this time, a study of this time period elucidates some interesting and important points for an adequate notion of penance. Additionally, medieval scholastic theology cannot be understood apart from its context, inarguably affected and conditioned by other historical and cultural currents. Taking this broader theo-cultural milieu into account, this essay deals with two key scholastic debates over penance. First, I will locate Abelard and Lombard as contritionists—those who assert that God’s forgiveness occurs at contrition rather than confession—and consequently consider their respective views on the necessity of confession. Second, since both acknowledge that God’s forgiveness comes at contrition rather than confession, I will examine how this position changes the role of priests for the two thinkers, as priests are now considered judges or doctors who need to

¹ Ulrich G. Leinsle, *Introduction to Scholastic Theology*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 16.

² Paul Anciaux, *La théologie du sacrement de pénitence au XII^e siècle* (Louvain: É. Nauwelaerts, 1949), vii.

develop suitable tools for these roles. The guiding idea of both sections is simple—Abelard and Lombard put forth theologies that overcome any overly routinized understandings of penance, placing personal responsibility on both penitent and confessor.

THE TWELFTH CENTURY INTERIORITY, CONTRITION, AND CONFESSION

The twelfth century marked an important but often unnoticed turning point in the history of Western Civilization, an incipient humanistic turn towards the subject that would eventually blossom in the Renaissance.³ Suddenly, interiority—whether motivations or emotions—took on increased significance. Historical treatments of the time have revealed this trend. Colin Morris wrote an entire book arguing that the period from 1050-1200 “discovered the individual,” a time which featured “a concern with self-discovery; an interest in the relations between people, and in the role of the individual within society; and an assessment of people by their inner intentions rather than by their external acts.”⁴

Writers have rightly nuanced this historiographic approach away from overly individualistic conceptions, however. Caroline Walker Bynum has argued that rather than discovering the individual at the expense of a wider community and external acts, the period “was characterized by the discovery of the group and the ‘outer man’ as well as by the discovery of the inner landscape and of the self.”⁵ Discovering the “self” provided a more holistic approach that had “a quite particular sense of the relationship between inner and outer, between motive and model.”⁶ Writers such as Philip of Harvenget and Hugh of St. Vic-

³ See M.-D. Chenu, “Nature and Man: The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century,” in *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*, ed. and trans. Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 1-48.

⁴ Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200* (London: SPCK, 1972), 158. See also Robert W. Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 1: “Recent research into various aspects of twelfth century European culture convinces me that one of the central motivating forces of the twelfth-century Renaissance was a new desire on the part of literate men and women to understand themselves as single, unique persons—as what we would call *individuals*. This impulse to understand operated in three distinguishable but not totally distinct areas: the individual in relation to his own makeup and character, the individual in relation to his social and institutional environment, and the individual in relation to his God.”

⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31, no. 1 (Jan. 1980): 3.

⁶ Bynum, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?,” 5.

tor evinced “that, in reform and moral improvement, exterior and interior will and should go together.”⁷ Self-change could likewise only be brought on by others, whether in discovering suitable models to imitate or through one’s communal surroundings.⁸

According to Jacques Le Goff, the interplay between these individual and communal elements would also play a significant theological role in the surging importance of purgatory in the twelfth century.⁹ Though this increasingly central notion in the spiritual lives of Christians “strengthened family, corporate, and fraternal ties, Purgatory, caught up in a personalization of spiritual life, actually fostered individualism. It focused attention on individual death and the judgment that followed.”¹⁰ The moral self-improvement in the afterlife could only mean an increased spiritual and moral probing of the self in this life, albeit an examination that could not remain at interiority alone. Unsurprisingly, because of the substantial overlap between the two, shifts in purgatorial understandings would mean shifts in understanding and performing penitential practices during the twelfth century.

Indeed, penance and confession gradually moved away from being communal and public to being more individual and private in the Early Middle Ages, and by the twelfth century, private confession had become the norm rather than the exception. As scholastic theology began to emerge, producing synthetic accounts of Christian doctrine and developing a more robust sacramental theology, questions arose over these newer penitential developments. One major question concerned the locus of forgiveness. While all accepted the tripartite division of contrition, confession, and satisfaction, theologians debated over when exactly God forgave sins. Two theological camps emerged. Confessionalists—canonists like Gratian—contended that forgiveness only occurred with the confession of sins and the absolution by a priest. Others, like Peter Abelard and Peter Lombard, were considered contritionists.¹¹ These theologians insisted that forgiveness occurred early, at the penitent’s moment of sorrow. How and why Abelard and

⁷ Bynum, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?,” 11. Also see 12: “That is what a saint *is*: one in whom extraordinary life (without) reflects extraordinary virtue and grace (within).”

⁸ Bynum, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?,” 16.

⁹ Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3-6. Le Goff diligently traces the vestiges of purgatory over time but places special emphasis on its eventual “spatialization” between 1150-1200, identifying this span as the time of purgatory’s birth. See 5: “Until the end of the twelfth century the noun *purgatorium* did not exist: *the* Purgatory had not yet been born.”

¹⁰ Le Goff, *Purgatory*, 233.

¹¹ For a detailed and comprehensive overview of the contours of this debate see Ancaux, “Le probleme de la necessite de la confession,” in *La théologie du sacrement de pénitence au XII^e siècle*: 164-274.

Lombard argued these positions shows their underlying concerns for authenticity as well as the strong ties between interior contrition and exterior confession.¹²

PETER ABELARD ON CONFESSION AND CONTRITION

Peter Abelard, living from 1079 to 1142, has captured the public imagination more than any other twelfth-century figure. Indeed, Abelard can be seen as an encapsulation of the age, and it is precisely his paradigmatic representation of the century that ‘discovered the self’ which makes him so popular. Movies have depicted the romantic forays of Abelard and Heloise, a spectacle referenced in literary works from such writers as Alexander Pope to Mark Twain to Etienne Gilson and even in music by Cole Porter. This intense interest in Abelard’s controversial and turbulent personal life is not accidental, as the seminal thinker provides a unique and fairly unprecedented glimpse into his own life, both through his correspondence with Heloise and his autobiographical *Historia Calamitatum*.

This strong sense of interiority goes beyond mere self-description though, affecting the entirety of his theological and philosophical work, especially his ethics. Abelard constructs his ethical framework in two works: his *Dialogus inter Philosophum, Judaeum, et Christianum* and *Scito Te Ipsum*, also known as his *Ethica*. The latter, the focus of this study, is aptly named *Know Thyself* for two reasons. First, as already discussed, the title corresponds well with the century’s *zeitgeist*, turning toward the inner person. Second, in the work, Abelard concerns himself with what Marilyn McCord Adams has termed the “locus of imputability,” that is, where moral judgments are made.¹³ Unsurprisingly, Abelard offers a heavily internal and intentional ethics focused on “consent.” This focus on interiority shapes Abelard’s understanding of penance, placing the locus of reconciliation at the level of genuine contrition. Importantly though, Abelard still upholds the necessity of confession. Abelard’s text merits closer attention.

Abelard begins his *Ethics* by offering his definition of sin: a “consent to what is inappropriate.”¹⁴ He arrives at this conclusion in part through a *reductio* argument, refusing to place sin in a bad will or an

¹² See Bernhard Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, trans. Francis Courtney (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 138-145, and James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1986), 140-148.

¹³ Marilyn McCord Adams, introduction to *Ethical Writings*, by Peter Abelard, trans. Paul V. Spade (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), xix.

¹⁴ Peter Abelard, “Ethics” in *Ethical Writings*, trans. Paul V. Spade (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), par. 7. Throughout the paper, I have used Spade’s translation and his paragraph numbers. Latin references are taken from D.E. Luscombe’s edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

act.¹⁵ He first dismantles the argument that sin is located in a bad will.¹⁶ More interestingly, however, in contrast to the penitential manuals before him, Abelard meticulously argues that sin is not in action, which “doesn’t add anything to the merit, whether it springs from good or bad willing.”¹⁷ He continues, “In fact, deeds... are equally common to reprobates and to the elect, are in themselves all indifferent.”¹⁸ Abelard instead locates sin at one’s interior consent, “when we don’t draw back from committing [the sin] and are wholly ready to carry it out should the opportunity arise.”¹⁹ Interior consent to sin, rather than exterior, ostensibly sinful actions, constitutes sin.

Similarly, the effect of intention on sin plays an important role in the first half of Abelard’s *Ethics*. As he writes, “For God doesn’t think about the things that are done but rather in what mind they are done. The merit or praiseworthiness of the doer doesn’t consist in the deed but the intention... [God] judges the mind itself in its intention’s purpose, not in the result of the outward deed.”²⁰ Regardless of the rightness or wrongness of an act, goodness or sinfulness resides at one’s intentions. Abelard so vehemently defends this thesis that he takes it to the furthest point he thinks possible. Concerning the persecutors of Christ and the martyrs who felt that they were doing the will of God, “we certainly can’t say they were sinning. No one’s ignorance is a sin.”²¹ Abelard does not stop here, as these persecutors “would have even sinned more seriously through fault if they had spared them contrary to conscience.”²² Truly, acts are indifferent! In Abelard’s ethical framework, interior conscience and intention take precedence even in the most extreme cases. In short, interiority guides Abelard’s ethics.

This stress on interiority provides an important context for the second half of his *Ethics*, which deals with penance. As mentioned earlier, when exactly forgiveness occurred—whether in confession or contrition—preoccupied the minds of many early medieval theologians and Abelard was no exception.²³ He begins the second half of his *Ethics*

¹⁵ Abelard, *Ethics*, 67.

¹⁶ See Abelard, *Ethics*, 9-15.

¹⁷ Abelard, *Ethics*, 25.

¹⁸ Abelard, *Ethics*, 90. Also see 6: “For whatever is common to good and bad people equally is irrelevant to virtue or vice.”

¹⁹ Abelard, *Ethics*, 29.

²⁰ Abelard, *Ethics*, 57 and 90.

²¹ Abelard, *Ethics*, 110.

²² Abelard, *Ethics*, 131.

²³ Peter Abelard, *Sic et Non: A Critical Edition*, ed. Blanche B. Boyer and Richard McKeon (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 510: “*Quod sine confessione non dimittantur peccata et contra.*”

by acknowledging its three movements: penitence (contrition), confession, and satisfaction.²⁴

Where, then, between these former two does reconciliation occur? Unsurprisingly, considering that interiority guides Abelard's thought, the French thinker argues that the locus of forgiveness is contrition, not confession. As he puts it:

Now sin—scorn for God or consent to evil—doesn't persist together with this groaning and contrition of heart (*contritione cordis*) we call true penitence. For God's charity, which inspires this groaning, is incompatible with any fault. In this groaning we are at once reconciled with God and obtain forgiveness for the preceding sin.²⁵

True penance occurs in one's inner life, *contritione cordis*.²⁶ Not only this, but contrition must be prompted by the right motivations. God's charity and love, not fear, should stir this inner sorrow, "moved to remorse not so much by fear of the penalties as by love for [God]."²⁷ Abelard sets high expectations for proper interior dispositions—sorrow out of love, not guilt—for Christian contrition. Abelard's stress on the sincerity of interiority parallels his larger ethical project.

But what, then, is the role of confessing sins? Based on what has been written thus far, it would seem that confession becomes superfluous for Abelard. He even writes, "There are people who think only God should be confessed to.... But I don't see what confession is worth before a God who knows all things, or what allowance the tongue gains for us."²⁸ Yet, instead of dismissing confession, Abelard somehow maintains the need for this external action.

He lists three practical advantages of confession. Confessing sins to confessors means more prayers from them. The humbling required in telling sins to another serves as part of the satisfaction. Likewise, in confessing sins, the confessor, and not the biased self, determines

²⁴ Abelard, *Ethics*, 150. "*Tria itaque sunt in reconciliatio peccatoris ad Deum, penitentia scilicet, confessio, satisfactio.*" (Luscombe ed., 32).

²⁵ Abelard, *Ethics*, 165.

²⁶ Abelard, *Ethics*, 151: "The mind's sorrow over what it has failed in is properly called penitence, namely when it troubles someone that he's gone out of bounds in some way."

²⁷ Abelard, *Ethics*, 164. Also see 168: "So wherever there is true penitence—that is coming only from the love of God—there remains no scorn for God..."

This theme is also important in his *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*: "Wherefore, our redemption through Christ's suffering is that deeper affection in us which not only frees us from slavery to sin, but also wins for us the true liberty of sons of God, so that we do all things out of love rather than fear—love to him who has shown us such grace that no greater can be found." In *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, ed. Eugene R. Fairweather (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970), 284.

²⁸ Abelard, *Ethics*, 183.

proper satisfaction, and accordingly penitents can rest more securely that they are properly atoning for their sins.²⁹

Abelard goes beyond mere usefulness though, as he posits that Satan himself makes penitents “embarrassed that the deed ... should be known by humans.”³⁰ He writes “But if someone wants medication for a wound, then no matter how disgusting the wound is, no matter how much it stinks, *it has to be disclosed* to the doctor so that the appropriate cure is used.”³¹ Confession, similarly, is mandatory.

Despite this, Abelard goes to great lengths to show that confession can still be omitted. He focuses on Peter’s denial of Jesus as one example where confession was and should have been omitted since more benefit than harm came from it. Once again, Abelard stresses proper motivations behind Peter’s omission. It would not have been right if done to maintain his reputation. Abelard notes that instead, Peter did it not for his own sake but with foresight for the sake of the church—had others known that its head was “so quick to deny and so faint-hearted,” the church could have easily floundered in its infant stages.³² Abelard broadens this Petrine prudence to all.³³ Nevertheless, though Peter did not *have* to confess sins, he could have confessed on account of the prayer support that he would have received—again, Abelard reiterates the usefulness over necessity of confession.³⁴ The thinker also adds that confession can be omitted if the priest is incompetent, further explored in the second half of this essay.

Abelard leaves his readers with a convoluted, if not contradictory, picture of confession’s necessity, at least on the surface. Forgiveness and reconciliation occur at the level of inner contrition. Confession is at least useful, and eventually Abelard posits its necessity. At the same time, Abelard asserts that there are times when confession can be omitted. Does this all result in an incoherent treatment of confession? Marcia Colish thinks so:

Despite the clarity and force of his contritonalist claims, Abelard wants to argue that confession is still necessary, even though the penitent’s sin has already been forgiven before he speaks to the priest.... Abelard is aware of the difficulties he imposes on himself in seeking

²⁹ Abelard, *Ethics*, 184.

³⁰ Abelard, *Ethics*, 185.

³¹ Abelard, *Ethics*, 185 (emphasis added). “[S]ed *qui plagae querit medicamentum, quantumcumque ipsa sordeat, quantumcumque oleat, medico reuelanda est ut conpetens adhibeatur curatio.*” (Luscombe ed., 100).

³² Abelard, *Ethics*, 187.

³³ Abelard, *Ethics*, 186-189. “By this kind of foresight many other people could also delay confession or do completely without it without sin, if they believed it would be more harmful than beneficial.”

³⁴ Abelard, *Ethics*, 190.

to make confession mandatory, and he makes heavy weather of his argument here, jumping from one idea to another in a kind of scatter-gun effort to distract the reader from the logical insufficiency of any of the claims he makes.³⁵

A more coherent picture, however, can be gleaned. Though admittedly speculative, perhaps the distinction can be made in light of how the confession is made. In this view, an arbitrary act of confession in itself separated from contrition is not necessary. Genuine contrition, a preoccupation of Abelard, is necessary, and this interior feeling most frequently results in exterior acts like confession.³⁶ In this sense, confession *is* necessary, confession arising from genuine contrition borne out of a love for God that demands doing anything for God. Accordingly, the penitent wants to reap all the benefits possible from the useful features confession offers. If a person forgoes confession, then perhaps contrition was not out of love for God, a false contrition Abelard warns against.

Nevertheless, though unique, the Petrine exception remains. Willemien Otten offers a provocative and helpful reading of Abelard's use of St. Peter here.³⁷ She appropriately situates Abelard in his monastic setting and focuses her attention on Abelard's citation of Ambrose regarding Peter:

I do not find what he said; I do find that he wept. I read about his tears; I do not read about atonement. The tears wash away the misdeed that it is a disgrace to confess out loud, and the weeping takes care of the forgiveness and shame. The tears speak without terror about the fault. They confess without detriment to the feeling of shame.³⁸

Peter's tears, borne out of genuine sorrow, contrition, and love for Christ, serve as his confession. Here, Peter's contrition and external

³⁵ Marcia L. Colish, *Peter Lombard*, vol. 2 (New York: E.J. Brill, 1994), 596.

³⁶ Susan R. Kramer writes "But if Abelard delineates a secret and private part of the self, he also makes clear in his theory of penance that this secret self must be exposed in order to be judged and punished by others. Abelard's contritionism was highly influential, but the criticisms and refinements of Abelard's penitential theory betray not only a new interest in the inner self and its relation to God, but also a new concern with exposing that inner life to human judgment and control." In "'We Speak to God with our Thoughts': Abelard and the Implications of Private Communication with God," *Church History* 69, no. 1 (March 2000): 39.

³⁷ Willemien Otten, "In Conscience's Court: Abelard's Ethics as a Science of the Self," in *Virtue and Ethics in the Twelfth Century*, ed. István P. Bejczy and Richard G. Newhauser (Boston: Brill Academic Publishing, 2005), 53-74.

³⁸ Abelard, *Ethics*, 186.

tears serve as one continuous, quasi-sacramental act, much like external confession should follow from contrition.³⁹ However, in Peter's case, "By artificially isolating guilt from love, formalized confession would somehow stand in the way of the soul who, by humbling himself, is trying to make satisfaction to God directly."⁴⁰ Abelard, a monk, would have been familiar with the monastic *officium flendi*.⁴¹ As a monastic reformer, the genuineness of Peter's tears help Abelard's larger project: "While he thereby seems to reinvigorate the concept of monastic life, including the office of weeping, he wants to dispense at the same time with the wear of its ritualized quality. In this regard Abelard's interest in the tears of Peter betraying Christ is quite revealing."⁴² Just like above, where an arbitrary confession is not necessary, genuine weeping out of sorrow is more valuable than formalized acts of sorrow that can easily become trite and inauthentic.

Thus, Abelard's projects, whether in monastic reform or writing on penance, are inseparable—proper and authentic interior motivations trump formalized and ritualized external actions that have the potential of becoming mere routine. These types of actions are not necessary, particularly since the locus of reconciliation occurs at contrition for Abelard. Nevertheless, it is the authenticity of this contrition that so often produces exterior acts such as confession, resulting in one continuous movement between contrition and confession. In this sense, confession is necessary. Instead of forwarding an inconsistent theology of penance, Abelard provides a nuanced approach that emphasizes interior authenticity.

PETER LOMBARD ON CONTRITION AND CONFESSION

Peter Lombard, living from approximately 1105 to 1164, likewise was a key figure of the twelfth century, though for different reasons. While lacking the intrigue and escapades of Abelard, Lombard instead made his mark by producing the most influential theological textbook

³⁹ Otten, "In Conscience's Court," 65: "In this position the sacramental dimension, the depth of moral insight, and the attention for individual conscience and conduct all play their part...I have chosen to label this view a kind of poetico-monastic exemplarism." For the role of tears in medieval penance, see David N. Power, "Contrition with Tears: Motivation for Repentance," in *Church and Theology: Essays in Memory of Carl J. Peter*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1995), 215-40.

⁴⁰ Otten, "In Conscience's Court," 66-7.

⁴¹ "Meanwhile it may be worth remembering that being tormented by a divided self was part of the monastic profession just as it was the monk's duty to lament the sinful state of the human condition regardless of the specifics of his own sinful behavior: the so-called *officium flendi*, the office of weeping." M.B. Pranger, "Bernard of Clairvaux: Work and Self," in *The Cambridge Companion to The Cistercian Order*, ed. Mette Birkeedal Bruun (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 190.

⁴² Otten, "In Conscience's Court," 72.

for the medieval period, his masterpiece *Sententiarum Quatuor Libri*, the *Sentences*. Synthesizing and resolving disputes between conflicting historical authorities on a broad scope of topics, Lombard's work proved to be indispensable for the ongoing development of scholastic theology. Beyond this impact though, arguably Lombard's greatest legacy comes from the sacramental theology he bequeathed, particularly in response to the gradual growth of Catharism. Unsurprisingly, the "Master of the Sentences" tackled the contrition-confession question, reaching similar conclusions as Abelard although in a slightly different way. If authentic interiority producing authentic acts can be said to guide Abelard's treatment of the contrition-confession question, then sacramentality can be said to guide Lombard's analysis of the same question.

Lombard's fourth book of the *Sentences*, *De Doctrina Signorum*, deals with sacraments. In the very first question, he defines a sacrament as "a sign of the grace of God and the form of invisible grace, inasmuch as it bears the likeness of the grace and is its cause. Thus, the sacraments were instituted for the sake not only of signifying but of sanctifying."⁴³ Crucial here is the relationship between the *sacramentum tantum* (rite only) and the inner reality, *res* (thing). Beyond merely signifying or resembling inner grace, the external rite itself "contain[s] and convey[s] that inner reality."⁴⁴ In other words, the two—*res* and *sacramentum*, interior and exterior—are distinct but ultimately inseparable, forming one reality. Externals convey internals. This understanding is crucial for fully grasping Lombard's theology of penance.

In his first distinction regarding penance, Peter hints at the contrition-confession question. Already he acknowledges the difference between inner and outer penance:

[B]ut penance is called both a sacrament and a virtue of the mind. For there is an inner penance, and an outward one. The exterior one is the sacrament; the interior one is the virtue of the mind and each of these is a cause of justification and salvation. But whether every outward penance is a sacrament and, if not everyone, then which is to be recognized by this name, we shall investigate later.⁴⁵

⁴³ Peter Lombard, *The Sentences*, trans. Giulio Silano (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2010), IV, d. 1, c. 4, a.2.

⁴⁴ Thomas M. Finn, "The Sacramental World in the Sentences of Peter Lombard," *Theological Studies* 69 (2008): 568. See also Damien van den Eynde, *Les définitions des sacrements pendant la première période de la théologie scolastique (1050-1240)* (Rome: Antonianum, 1950), 40-46.

⁴⁵ Lombard, *Sent.* IV, d. 14, c. 1, a.1.

Shortly thereafter, Lombard offers a definition of penance similar to Abelard's, emphasizing interior contrition. Penance is "a virtue by which we bewail and hate, with purpose of amendment, the evils we have committed, and we will not to commit again the things we have bewailed. And so true penance is to sorrow in one's soul and to hate vices."⁴⁶ Rather than deriving from an external act, this penance comes from sorrow, compunction, and a resolve not to sin again—in other words, contrition.

Yet, Lombard only explicitly explores the question in Distinctions XVI and XVII. Referencing John Chrysostom and Augustine, he delineates the three traditional components of penance: "compunction of heart, confession of the mouth, satisfaction in deed (*compunctio cordis, confessio oris, satisfactio operis*)."⁴⁷ Soon after, he considers whether sin can be forgiven through only contrition without satisfaction and confession and from this whether at times one can confess to God without a priest and whether confession can be made to another layperson.⁴⁸ Lombard is well aware of the difficulties of these questions, "For in these matters even the learned are found to answer differently, because the doctors appear to have transmitted views regarding them which are various and almost contradictory."⁴⁹

After considering some of these opinions, like Abelard, Lombard places the locus of reconciliation at contrition, asserting:

Surely... sins are blotted out by contrition and humility of heart, even without confession by the mouth and payment of outward punishment. For from the moment when one proposes, with compunction of mind, that one will confess, God remits; because there is present confession of the heart, although not of the mouth, by which the soul is cleansed inwardly from the spot and contagion of the sin committed, and the debt of eternal death is released.⁵⁰

At this point, Marcia Colish, who earlier criticized Abelard's unwillingness to take his contritionism further, lauds Lombard as "a staunch contritionist, and as the only supporter of that side of the debate in the mid-twelfth century who refuses to shrink from the logic of its claims, who goes on to develop a coherent and non-contradictory theory of the relations between contrition and the other two traditional elements

⁴⁶ Lombard, *Sent.* IV, d. 14, c. 3, a.1.

⁴⁷ Lombard, *Sent.* IV, d. 16, c. 1, a.1.

⁴⁸ Lombard, *Sent.* IV, d. 17, c. 1, a.1.

⁴⁹ Lombard, *Sent.* IV, d. 17, c. 1, a.2.

⁵⁰ Lombard, *Sent.* IV, d. 17, c. 1, a.11.

in the penitential rite... [offering] arguments that are relatively extreme in their defense."⁵¹ Colish ultimately concludes that given Lombard's contritonalist position, confession, while useful, is no longer necessary, "willing to regard confession and satisfaction as optional."⁵²

Against this, however, while maintaining that forgiveness and reconciliation do occur at contrition for Lombard, Phillip Rosemann directly challenges Colish's position that confession no longer becomes necessary for the medieval thinker. This challenge arises from what Rosemann correctly identifies as a centerpiece of Lombard's understanding of penance; namely, that exterior acts arise from true interior contrition. As he writes:

It seems to me that Professor Colish is exaggerating the decisiveness of the Lombard's stance on these matters, indeed to the point of misrepresenting his position. For Colish downplays a crucial aspect of Peter's theory: the penitent's intention or desire (*votum*) to complete his or her contrition, or inner penance, with the requisite outer acts, and to do so as soon as possible.⁵³

⁵¹ Colish, *Lombard*, 602-3. On 603, she writes: "Can sins be remitted without confession and without satisfaction? Can one confess just to God, purely by one's contrition of heart, without a priest as accessory? Can one confess to a lay person? Peter plans to answer each of these questions with a resounding 'yes'."

⁵² Colish, *Lombard*, 603-4: "Peter's own chosen solution is that the remission of sin is a gift of God that is given in the contrition stage of penance...If the penitent has time, he should also confess to a priest, although the sin has already been remitted. Peter presents this issue as if penitents are people with such busy schedules that, for perfectly legitimate reasons, they may be unable to go to confession.... In any event, Peter emphasizes, while it is a good idea, confession is not necessary, 'since the sin has already been forgiven in contrition'."

She continues on 608: "Of all the masters on the contritonalist side of the debate, the Lombard is the only one who is truly and wholly faithful to the logic of that position, to the point of being willing to regard confession and satisfaction as optional, to abridge dramatically the power of the keys in penance, and to exempt penitents, whose spiritual welfare comes first, for this is the reason why the sacrament was instituted, from having to subject themselves to the ministrations of indiscreet priests, encouraging them instead to seek the counsel they need wherever they may find it....Peter's systematic and consistent defense of contritionism, along with the corollaries of that stance, which he does not hesitate to draw, put Peter in a rather more exposed position. It was one that lay well within the orthodox consensus of his own day, to be sure, but it came close to locating itself on the radical fringe just inside the limits of that orthodox consensus. Peter Lombard is the only contemporary contritonalist able to offer as strong, as well-reasoned, and as well-documented a case on behalf of its cause as Gratian was able to offer on behalf of confessionism."

⁵³ Philipp W. Rosemann, *Peter Lombard* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 163.

A few texts from the *Sentences* confirm this interpretation that authentic interior sorrow produces corresponding exterior acts of contrition—confession. Hence, confession is necessary.

Still, as a pastor, Lombard does offer flexibility when one is unable to confess but still has a desire to do so.⁵⁴ These exceptions, however, do not make confession on a whole optional, as Colish asserts. For Lombard, just the opposite is true; confession is necessary precisely because the contrite want to confess: “For just as inward penance is enjoined upon us, so also are outward satisfaction and confession by the mouth, if they are possible and so he is not truly penitent, who does not have the intention to confess.”⁵⁵ Much like Abelard, Lombard views confession as useful—as a humbling satisfaction and as a way to receive penance from another. He writes:

And so, if it is asked for what is confession necessary, since the sin is already blotted out in contrition, we say: because it is a kind of punishment for the sin, as is satisfaction in deed. Also, through confession the priest understands what judgment he is to give as to the crime. Through it, too, the sinner is made humbler and more careful.⁵⁶

Here, Lombard unequivocally states the necessity of confession. Though the locus of reconciliation is still interior contrition, for Lombard, true contrition wants to reap the benefits and humbling of confession, and “true penance includes the intention to submit oneself to each divine rule.”⁵⁷ Understood this way, confession becomes necessary.

Perhaps the best way to articulate the role of confession in Lombard’s reckoning of penance can be found in his sacramental theology, discussed earlier. Here, *res* and *sacramentum* form one seamless reality. Externals convey inner realities, going beyond merely signifying to actually sanctifying.⁵⁸ The parallels to confession are clear here: inner feelings produce exterior actions, true contrition produces confession. Unlike other sacraments, Lombard only examines the *res* and *sacramentum* of penance at the end of his considerations.⁵⁹ Positing

⁵⁴ Lombard, *Sent.* IV, d. 17, c. 3, a. 8. “[I]t is indubitably shown that it is necessary to offer confession first to God, and then to the priest, if the opportunity for this exists; nor is there any other way to come to the gate of paradise.”

⁵⁵ Lombard, *Sent.* IV, d. 17, c. 1, a.13.

⁵⁶ Lombard, *Sent.* IV, d. 17, c. 5, a.1.

⁵⁷ Ancaux, *Sacrement de pénitence*, 230: “*La vraie pénitence comprend l’intention de se soumettre à toutes les prescriptions divines.*”

⁵⁸ As Karl Rahner would say, grace has an “incarnational tendency.” See his “Personal and Sacramental Piety,” *Theological Investigations* (vol. 2), trans. K.-H. Kruger (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1990), 119.

⁵⁹ Colish, *Lombard*, 600: “One striking and unusual feature of Peter’s handling of penance is that he offers his fullest definition of the *sacramentum* and *res sacramenti*

that inward and outward penance constitutes one sacrament, he concludes: "For inward penance is both the thing of the sacrament, that is, of outward penance, and the sacrament of the remission of sin, which it both signifies and brings about. Outward penance is also a sign of both inward penance and the remission of sins."⁶⁰ Though forgiveness occurs at contrition, this inward penance cannot be separated from outward penance, confession, which signifies true contrition. Or, as Rosemann succinctly concludes, "Genuine remorse is keen to show itself in external acts."⁶¹

Bynum's interpretation of the twelfth century, reinforced by Le Goff's work, confirms this trend. By correcting overly individualistic descriptions of the century's renaissance, they illustrate the interplay between the individual and the outside world, particularly in external actions. This nuanced approach provides a more adequate framework for understanding how contritionists like Abelard and Lombard could maintain the necessity of confession. Abelard's emphasis on genuine interiority and Lombard's sacramentality allowed them both to assert this necessity out of a conviction that a prior authentic interiority drives resultant exterior actions.⁶² For both, confessing sins is not considered an act to be done perfunctorily, but rather a result of genuine contrition.

THE ROLE OF PRIESTS AND CONFESSION IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY

Abelard and Lombard's contritionist positions affect the role of the priest; if confession is necessary because of its usefulness, it must actually be useful. Rather than simply reciting a perfunctory formula,

at the end of his treatise on the subject, rather than at the beginning... Peter adopts this strategy because he seeks to present the definitions with which he concludes as following logically from the analysis and argumentation that precede them."

⁶⁰ Lombard, *Sent.* IV, d. 22, c. 2, a.5.

⁶¹ Rosemann, *Lombard*, 164: "These three texts can hardly be interpreted as ringing endorsements of contritionism. Again and again, they emphasize the unity of the three aspects of penance: contrition of heart, external manifestation of that contrition (shown in a confession made to a priest, together with works of expiation), and remission of sins. Peter's argument for the necessity of outer penance seems to be based upon commonsense pastoral experience. Genuine remorse is keen to show itself in external acts. A true penitent will be eager to consult a priest on the appropriate satisfaction required to atone for his or her misdeeds; to undo the damage, as it were. A truly remorseful person, moreover, will not be reluctant to humble him- or herself by accepting the priest's judgment."

⁶² See Robert Hancock and Robert Williams, "The Scholastic Debate on the Essential Moment of Forgiveness," *Resonance* 1 (1965), 66. "Even though reconciliation with the Church had by this time lost its sacramental significance, Peter Lombard held the opinion of Abelard in essence concerning confession, i.e., that confession will inevitably follow contrition, but that it (confession) is only the payment of eternal penalty."

the priest is tasked with discerning the authenticity of contrition and assigning proper satisfaction. The competency and ability of the priest is now considered.

This too can be situated in historical, cultural, and theological developments of the time. Stemming particularly from the Investiture Controversy and the ensuing Gregorian Reforms of the late eleventh century, church life was gradually becoming increasingly clerical as the papacy asserted power above and distinct from secular leaders. Higher moral, quasi-monastic standards and increasingly exclusive sacred powers set priests apart from other Christians. The personal authenticity so important in Abelard and Lombard's work would require priestly competencies that actually corresponded to these lofty ideals. So too did the complexification of sin—taking into account consent, will, and act and delineating between venial and mortal—and the connected increase of purgatory's prominence in the twelfth-century Christian imagination greatly magnify the importance of priestly responsibilities in the confessional.⁶³ Satisfaction properly done in this life would mean mitigation of punishment in the next; thus, the assignment of satisfaction became an especially vital priestly role. How exactly Abelard and Lombard integrated these clerical considerations into their penitential accounts is the next concern of this essay.

ABELARD ON THE ROLE OF THE PRIEST IN CONFESSION

On multiple occasions in his treatment of penance, Peter Abelard criticizes and rues the incompetency of priests of his time, especially as confessors. Since God forgives at compunction, Abelard allows for a person to forgo confession if it does more harm than good. Gossiping priests disclosing confessions, for instance, can be an occasion for sin as penitents only become more absorbed in anger than before they went to confess sins. In other words, incompetent priests can lead to even more sinning. He writes:

Just as many people become incompetent doctors (*medici*) whom it is dangerous or useless for the sick to be sent to, so too with the Church's prelates. There are many who are neither religious nor discreet, and who are furthermore quick to divulge the sins of those who confess to them, with the result that confessing to them appears not only useless but even destructive (*perniciosum*)... Since they also frivolously disclose the confessions they receive, as we said, they move penitents to outrage, and those who ought to have cured sins bring about new

⁶³ Le Goff, *Purgatory*, 233.

wounds of sins and scare the people who hear about it away from confession.⁶⁴

Comparing the confessor to a doctor is telling. Doctors can make diseases worse by misdiagnosing or not taking the disease seriously enough. While doctors themselves cannot heal diseases (only medicine or other means can), they do play an important role in assigning the proper means to facilitate cures. Not received passively, competency to diagnose effectively comes from training, experience, and even natural ability.

Because competency plays such a large role for Abelard, he raises a few more points. Monks desiring better confessors than assigned, though they should first consult their superiors, can ultimately go against their superiors' restrictions if they truly feel the need for a better confessor. For "it is better to pick a leader who sees than it is to follow someone over the cliff by mistake who has been assigned to him by mistake."⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Abelard distinguishes between a confessor's conduct and his effective teaching. As long as a hypocritical confessor does not lead the penitent to more sin, his advice and judgment and the act of confession itself should still be valued.⁶⁶ Thus, a priest's ability as a confessor is most important, even more so than his conduct.

Abelard's acknowledgement of incapable priests affects his treatment of the *claves* of binding and loosing in Matthew 16:19, a question that preoccupied many of the early scholastics. Like the incompetent confessors, Abelard now considers the "many bishops who have neither religion nor discernment even though they have episcopal power."⁶⁷ He acknowledges that, though Christ gave discernment and holiness to the apostles, this endowment does not necessarily apply to their successors.⁶⁸ Borrowing heavily from Jerome's interpretation of the Matthean passage, Abelard affirms that a bishop does not bind or loose people himself; rather, he knows "who is to be bound or who is

⁶⁴ Abelard, *Ethics*, 191. See 192: "Sometimes too, in revealing sins out of either rage or frivolousness, they seriously scandalize the Church and put those who have confessed into great perils."

⁶⁵ Abelard, *Ethics*, 193. See 192: "Hence people are in no way to be blamed who have decided to avoid their superiors because of these improprieties, and pick other people whom they believe are more appropriate in such cases. *Instead they are more to be commended for going off to a more skillful doctor.*" [Emphasis added]

⁶⁶ Abelard, *Ethics*, 196: "Therefore, such people's judgment isn't to be scorned—that is people who preach well but live badly, who educate by word but don't edify by their example. They show the way they are unwilling to follow."

⁶⁷ Abelard, *Ethics*, 205.

⁶⁸ Abelard, *Ethics*, 206.

to be released once he has heard their various sins in his official capacity."⁶⁹ In other words, binding and loosing is not an eclectic episcopal power that determines eschatological placements, but one of recognition and discernment; the ability and conduct of the bishops becomes important.⁷⁰ Again, responsibility is placed on the cleric here—the keys require properly discerning who is and who is not forgiven by God.

Since the keys are primarily about discerning God's judgment and will, this places episcopal power below God's. While this may sound like an obvious point, it has important implications, especially when paired with incompetent clerics; namely, that there can be a discrepancy between ecclesiastical judgment and God's. Abelard begins by referencing Gregory, "ecclesiastical power is unable to do any binding or releasing if it departs from justice's fairness and doesn't conform to divine judgment...it is obvious that the bishops' judgment is worthless if it departs from divine fairness, wanting to deal death to or enliven those they cannot."⁷¹ Ecclesiastical judgment, from macro-matters like excommunication to micro-matters in the private confessional, is held to a standard extant beyond itself. God's judgment takes precedence over the judgment of priests and bishops, sometimes even contradicting it.⁷² Unbecoming clerics who, mired in sin or engrossed in worldly occupations, make judgments to satisfy personal vendettas prove that this can be the case. Carefully discerning God's judgment becomes the task of clerics when it comes to binding and loosing sins.

If Abelard stressed the proper interior motivations and sorrow in contrition for confesseees, he now places the responsibility on confessors and the entire hierarchical church. By comparing the role of confessors to doctors and noting that there can be a gap between ecclesiastical and divine judgment, clerics are held to a high standard. Now,

⁶⁹ Abelard, *Ethics*, 208. See 209, where Abelard extends this to beyond bishops. "[W]e understand this binding or absolving as the judging just mentioned, which was granted generally to all, so that they have the power to judge who is to be bound or absolved by God and to discriminate between the clean and unclean."

⁷⁰ In Abelard, *Ethics*, 210, Abelard quotes Origen, who emphasizes the conditionality of Matt 16:19: "[I]t is ridiculous for us to say that one who is bound with the shackles of his sins, who drags his sins behind him like a long cord, and who continually drags his iniquities around like a calf's leash has this kind of power solely because he is called a 'bishop', so that those released by him on earth are released in heaven, or those bound on earth are bound in heaven."

⁷¹ Abelard, *Ethics*, 214, 218.

⁷² Abelard, *Ethics*, 220: "When someone who gets into an excommunication he didn't earn is kept out of the Church, so that association with the faithful isn't granted to him, he is indeed bound unjustly. But God tears apart these shackles of anathema, because he voids the pastor's judgment so that it doesn't cut off from grace the person whom the pastor separated from the Church."

they are tasked with diagnosing correctly and scrutinizing properly the will of God beyond their own wills.

LOMBARD ON THE ROLE OF PRIESTS IN CONFESSION

Peter Lombard likewise provides an involved account of the priest's role in confession and the keys of Matthew 16:19, reaching conclusions similar to Abelard. While the image of a doctor was dominant for Abelard, the image of a judge is Lombard's primary metaphor. He begins Distinction XVIII by questioning what exactly the role of the priest is in confession: "[I]f the sin is entirely remitted by God through contrition of the heart and from the moment when the penitent has the intention of confessing, what is afterwards remitted to him by the priest?"⁷³ Lombard notes that God, not the priest, saves sinners from eternal punishment.⁷⁴ At the same time, he wants to maintain that priests can still remit and retain sins "in another" way.⁷⁵ The author of the *Sentences* diligently explores exactly what this other way is.

Like Abelard, Lombard begins his discussion by referencing Jerome's interpretation of Matthew 16:19. Jerome refers readers to Leviticus 14:2, where priests themselves do not cure lepers but "merely discern which are clean and which unclean."⁷⁶ Lombard concludes from this "that God does not follow the Church's judgment, for sometimes the latter judges through deception and ignorance but God always judges according to the truth."⁷⁷ Just as Abelard admits, there can be discrepancies between ecclesial and divine judgment, and the former does not dictate the latter. Remission and retention of sins only occurs when priests reflect God's own judgment.

Clerical binding and loosing occurs in the imposition of satisfaction on penitents as well. Crucially, priests do not impose penitential satisfaction on just anybody, only those "whom the priest adjudges to be truly penitent; if he does not impose it on someone, he thereby indicates that the sin has been retained by God."⁷⁸ The priest is tasked with judging true sorrow and contrition; the priest must be competently prudent in detecting this authenticity. Lombard still maintains the priority of God's judgment. Since the discernment of the priest is a natural phenomenon, it can be mistaken. Indeed, "sometimes they

⁷³ Lombard, *Sent.* IV, d. 18, c. 1, a. 1.

⁷⁴ Lombard, *Sent.* IV, d. 18, c. 4, a. 7. He concludes "By these and other testimonies, it is taught that God alone by himself remits sins; and just as he remits them from some, so also he retains the sins of others."

⁷⁵ Lombard, *Sent.* IV, d. 18, c. 5.

⁷⁶ Lombard, *Sent.* IV, d. 18, c. 6, a. 2.

⁷⁷ Lombard, *Sent.* IV, d. 18, c. 6, a. 3.

⁷⁸ Lombard, *Sent.* IV, d. 18, c. 6, a. 5.

show as loosed or bound those who are not such before God.”⁷⁹ Ultimately, God alone remits sins, and clerics only recognize this, parsing out appropriate satisfaction.⁸⁰ It is the cleric’s duty to align his judgment with God’s.

From this conclusion, Lombard turns in Distinction XIX to address the qualities of priests in the context of his discussion of the keys. He bifurcates the keys into the knowledge of discernment and the power of binding and loosing. The former, for Lombard, is not given automatically at ordination since “it does not seem that all, or only, priests have these keys, because several have the knowledge of discernment before ordination, many lack it after consecration.”⁸¹ Abilities to discern are not passively received at ordination, but rather are found in natural and developed capacities. Lombard does maintain, however, that the key of binding and loosing is given to all priests. He again nuances this position with the proper personal conduct of priests, as they do not have this power “rightly and worthily, unless they preserve the manner of life and teaching of the Apostles.”⁸² Nevertheless, priests can still exercise this power despite their unworthiness, since God can work through unworthy ministers.

At this point, a tension begins to emerge in Lombard’s understanding of priests between natural abilities for discernment on one hand and the power of God working through the minister on the other hand. Referencing Augustine’s writings against the Donatists, Lombard maintains that “the order is not deprived of the power to confer grace because of the minister’s unworthiness.”⁸³ Similarly, Lombard argues that worthy priests confer the fullness of blessing and that unworthy priests do not harm their subjects’ reception of grace. Following Abelard in Augustine’s anti-Donatist footsteps, he maintains that one should still follow the good advice of a bad priest.

To compensate for these deficiencies, Lombard ends Distinction XIX with an epideictic description of the ideal “ecclesiastical judge,” taken from Pseudo-Augustine’s *De Vera et Falsa Poenitentia*. Confessors are to be conscientious, becoming aware and taking care of their own sins. Likewise, they are to possess a good will and have a sweet disposition. They should be good questioners, taking into account all circumstances of a sin.⁸⁴ Though Lombard sums it up in only

⁷⁹ Lombard, *Sent. IV*, d. 18, c. 7, a. 1.

⁸⁰ Rosemann, *Lombard*, 165, writes “Just as genuine compunction seeks to externalize itself, in order to make a positive difference in the world of the now repentant sinner, so God’s forgiveness has its external counterpart in the judgment of the priest.”

⁸¹ Lombard, *Sent. IV*, d. 19, c. 1, a. 3.

⁸² Lombard, *Sent. IV*, d. 19, c. 1, a. 8.

⁸³ Lombard, *Sent. IV*, d. 19, c. 2, a. 1.

⁸⁴ Lombard, *Sent. IV*, d. 19, c. 4, a. 1.

two words—“discreet and just”—his high expectations for confessors, as judges, are clear.

Like Abelard then, Lombard places high responsibility on priests alongside penitents. For both, since forgiveness occurs at contrition, the priest is tasked to evaluate contrition and sins, assigning satisfaction accordingly. At the same time, both thinkers lament the ubiquity of incompetent priests of the age and so acknowledge that divine and ecclesiastical judgment can sometimes be two different things. To prevent this divergence from happening, Abelard and Lombard both stress proper conduct and the cultivation of confessional skills. These tools come neither passively nor naturally; priests must be active and diligent in pursuing these ideals.

Abelard and Lombard use two different metaphors for the confessor—doctor and judge respectively. Lombard’s metaphor of a judge portrays sin more as an offense against God, while Abelard’s metaphor sees sin more as a disease to be cured by mercy. Perhaps Lombard’s juridical emphasis comes from his deeper integration of purgatory in his theological system.⁸⁵ The “penitential bookkeeping” that came with the stronger awareness of purgatory required as much in the twelfth century.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, Abelard’s stress on love and mercy throughout his larger theological project is more prone to see the confessor as a doctor. For both though, situated in the midst of an increasingly cultic notion of priesthood prompted by the Gregorian reforms, the ability to forgive sins and assign satisfactions does not necessarily come just through *sacra potestas* given at ordination. Their images instead require abilities that need developing, and this cultivation is the responsibility of the confessor. Indeed, the Spirit works through, though is not identified with, human processes.⁸⁷

CONCLUSION

This essay has attempted to examine and compare two features of Peter Abelard and Peter Lombard’s theologies of penance. First, both were contritionists who maintained confession’s necessity. Here, authentic interiority guided Abelard while sacramentality guided Lombard. Both accentuated the need for a genuine contrition that prompted

⁸⁵ See Lombard, *Sent.* IV, d. 21, c. 45.

⁸⁶ Le Goff, *Purgatory*, 152.

⁸⁷ In explaining the interplay of the Holy Spirit and human processes, Richard McCormick warns against two extremes. One explains the Spirit’s assistance as dispensing with human processes while the other reduces this assistance to human processes. Though McCormick is principally concerned with the magisterium and infallibility, the same categories and need for middle ground can be applied to confession. See Richard A. McCormick, *Notes on Moral Theology: 1965 Through 1980* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), 260-265.

the subject to confess sins orally. A theme of the twelfth century, interiority was to produce corresponding exterior acts. Second, both saw the priest's fundamental role in confession as a doctor or judge. A priest's ability and aptitude to diagnose and judge was crucial, particularly given the increased importance of purgatory in the twelfth century. Together, these points meant that both confesseees and confessors were held to a high standard.

Abelard and Lombard thus offer a theology that demolishes any overly formalistic, ritualistic, and stale practices of penance. Penance is not a perfunctory duty to be performed; rather, penitents need to scour their own intentions and conscience, seeking true remorse for sins. Priests cannot formulaically or absent-mindedly absolve sins; they need to carefully listen to oral confessions, assigning satisfaction borne out of wisdom, experience, and mercy that reflects God's own. When viewed this way, the sacrament takes on a new serious, discerning, and even dramatic character. While overemphasizing this character could lead to over-scrupulosity and guilt, ultimately these theologies can and should lead to more fruitful practices and experiences of penance and, with those, experiences of God's merciful love. **M**