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Contemporary Irish Moral Discourse

ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF PATRICK HANNON

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CHAPTER ONE

An authentic Celtic voice: The Irish Penitential and contemporary discourse on reconciliation

Hugh Connolly

A recent edition of a leading business newspaper carried a rather striking image on the front page of its commercial section. A photograph depicted the chief executive of a global company together with the CEO of its Japanese arm making a collective bow to the assembled journalists and onlookers as they sought to deliver a fulsome and abject public apology on behalf of their company for its failure to comply with certain Japanese legal and regulatory requirements.¹ Evidently a prior boardroom decision had been taken which recognised that on this occasion and in this cultural setting nothing less than a public display of humility and contrition, as well as the payment of the requisite penalties, would wash with their oriental customer base. Words alone, however sincere, were clearly deemed insufficient.

This little vignette from the world of corporate affairs may seem light years away from the era of the Penitentials. It might nevertheless be reasonably argued that it is but a contemporary representation of the timeless truth – and one which is also to be found at the very core of those medieval manuals of penance – that a purely verbal approach to repentance is neither humanly adequate nor morally sound. The recent proliferation both at home and abroad of tribunals of enquiry, boards of redress and truth and reconciliation commissions seems to point to a deep-seated human desire to have hurts and injustices brought into the light of day in order for a true healing to begin. It points toward a need for stories to be told and rituals to be found for bringing conflicts and conflicting parties into a new space where conflict begins to give way to a more wholesome confrontation of the underlying issue. It is perhaps in this quest for new models of repentance that we can learn from what I would argue is

1. *Financial Times*, Tuesday 26 October 2004, 'Citigroup Apologises to Japan', 30.

some remarkably sophisticated philosophy and machinery of reconciliation to be found in the penitential books.

Some years ago, when I was undertaking a doctoral programme with the Gregorian University, I embarked on a study of the Penitentials with a view to unearthing some of the insights of that admittedly primitive era, in order that they might be brought to bear on the contemporary approach to sacramental penance.² For me, the era of Irish monasticism which substantially influenced the development of private confession, and which saw the arrival of the Penitential as a new literary genre, was a key moment and one which merited more analysis than had been undertaken to date. Two decades later I have the feeling that some of the observations I then made in the context of individual repentance have a further relevance and application in the contemporary quest for collective expressions of repentance and effective communal models of reconciliation. Further, I believe that the more recent attention to and development of the issue of restorative justice within civil society, and the attendant questions that it poses of a theology of repentance, also warrant a fresh look at these ancient texts.³

What happened in the golden age of the Irish church clearly triggered the imagination of people all over the Christian world and beyond. People began to find sustenance and support from a ritual of repentance which had, until then, been severely under-utilised and under-developed. Christian teachings on forgiveness and reconciliation were in that era made present to people in a new and exciting way. Fourteen hundred years later, that excitement has all but disappeared. One suspects that the very terminology of conversion, repentance, penance and the like, seem to carry with them for some people unsavoury resonances of a bygone era. They are seen by not a few to reflect attitudes and practices and an image of God with which the contemporary believer is no longer at ease.

One corrective feature of Irish penance, which I had signalled then as perhaps worthy of attention in this regard, was its 'holistic' dimension. There was a very definite shared conviction

2. Published in Connolly, H., *The Irish Penitentials and their challenge for the Sacrament of Penance today*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 1995.

3. See for instance Marshall, T., *Restorative Justice an Overview*, Home Office Publications, London, 1999 and Van Ness, D., & Heetderks, K., *Restoring Justice*, Anderson Press, Cincinnati, 1997.

among the penitentialists that just as sinful choices are reflected at the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual levels, so too should all of these facets be involved in the curative penitential process. Metanoia could not simply remain a purely intellectual, abstract concept. Instead, once embarked upon, it had to produce real and far-reaching change. Even a preliminary observation of the popularity today of places of real pilgrimage such as Lough Derg, Croagh Patrick, the Camino de Santiago and the like suggests that there remains at least a residue of that holistic approach to penance within the spirituality and religious consciousness of the contemporary Christian.

In that earlier study, I had also argued that part of the problem for the sacrament of penance today arises from the disproportionate emphasis that was given to the canonical dimension. Many people did not feel inclined to celebrate this sacrament because the ritual itself, as they saw it, formed part of an authoritarian world, which they had rejected. Thus, while society, government, the family and Catholic theology throughout the twentieth century had gradually moved away from imperial models and symbols and towards more communitarian expressions of authority, the sacrament of penance was slower to shed its somewhat legalistic and impersonal vocabulary.⁴ Although this situation has arguably been addressed at a theological level in both conciliar and post-conciliar documents, it would still seem that fresh thinking at the level of ecclesiology and penitential theology has yet to be mirrored by a corresponding rethink at the level of pastoral praxis. In short, the result was that what should have been an important moment of healing encounter was still marred by an excessive 'mechanism', and more especially by what some commentators have called the 'absolutionist mentality'. That key aspect of confession of sins, which made it a nodal point, along the journey of faith, was somehow neglected and reduced instead to an unhealthy legalism. The result was a tendency toward an excessive verbalism where the penitent merely verbalised all areas of weakness and the confessor, in turn, almost invariably prescribed a verbal act of satisfaction. Ironically part of the reason for the tendency toward verbalism may have been, I believe, a desire to avoid any suggestion that in undertaking a rigorous act of satisfaction, such as those pre-

4. For a masterly overview of this see Latourelle. R., *Man and his Problems in the Light of Jesus Christ*, New York, Alba 1982, 375ff.

scribed in the Penitentials, one was somehow earning or meriting divine forgiveness. A simple verbal act of satisfaction could have no such connotation. Whilst this was no doubt a laudable aim, the downside was a very real slide into what one might call a certain 'tokenism'. There was no real sense of challenging human weakness so as to undo hurts and make good on wrongs inflicted on others.

For all their severity, the Penitentials had the merit I believe of avoiding this scenario. They distinguished between 'doing penance' (*poenitere*) and 'making satisfaction' (*satis facere*). On one occasion the Penitential of Cummean notes: 'He who utters in anger harsh but not injurious words shall make satisfaction to his brother and keep a special fast.' (Cu.IV.13). On the one hand, there is the imposition of a penance for purposes of correction and, on the other, there is also a practical prescription to undo the harm that has been caused. This finds expression in Cummean's dictum concerning penitents: namely, that after being led to repentance they are to be (a) corrected of their error, (b) amended of their vices and (c) rendered such that God is favourable to them. There is an unexpected refinement and sense of process and progression here and this is duly reflected in the prescribed acts of penance.

Likewise there are many instances of acts of satisfaction, which entail a repayment of what is owed. To be sure these are often characterised by a juridical tone which, at its worst, tends to reduce the whole scenario to a logic of commerce and of repayment of debts and dues. The tariff system was, after all, to become the Achilles' heel of the penitential manuals. However, even where the emphasis is distinctly flawed, it has the advantage of highlighting tangible deeds that are demonstrative of a purpose of amendment.

At another level, there is also awareness that wrongdoing can unleash a whole chain of harmful and damaging consequences that are not simply confined to the perpetrator but can serve to wreak havoc upon the lives of others. The manual of Columbanus, reflecting on the situation of a family which becomes destitute because of the killing of the breadwinner, acknowledges that a family would remain destitute if penance were simply limited to an expression of repentance by the killer. So it obliges the perpetrator 'to take the place and shoulder the responsibilities of his victim' (Co.B.13). Similarly in Cummean

in the case of wilful injury the penitentialist sees that the victim's wounds, damages and medical expenses will not be diminished by the mere fact of the aggressor's repentance. The penitent it seems has to be brought to an awareness of his responsibilities. (Cu.IV.9). For the penitentialists, there has to be concrete external evidence of the inner change of heart.

It is clear, then, that they understood the personal and social consequences of sin as not necessarily obliterated by conversion alone. They were convinced that there is a further human and social dimension that goes beyond personal repentance and reconciliation with God. Of course there is no denying that repentance belongs properly to the human heart; but the penitentialists saw it as part of their task, to find creative ways in which conversion could find real expression in daily human activity.

In other words, they proposed an integral, holistic approach to penitential activity. Just as there was a very real and tangible physical dimension to the initial wrongdoing, so too real reconciliation more often than not had to find expression in a material act of reparation. Only in this way, as they saw it, could the person that had been 'infected and wounded' by sin, be integrated, healed and restored via the 'medicine' of penance. Struggle against sin through prayer and ascetic activity was prescribed in plenty, but this ultimately had to spill over into concrete action if repentance were to be complete. For the monastic fathers, (who had a vehement distaste of sorcery and superstitious practices), there could be nothing 'magical' about personal conversion. To be sure, forgiveness was God-given and gratuitous, but the work of overcoming the consequences of sin had to be undertaken and come to fruition in daily life.

I believe that the penitentialists in their own way saw that no system of penance could be built entirely upon a philosophy of retribution, focusing primarily upon punishment and flowing from feelings of revenge. A purely negative philosophy would only produce negative results and the vicious circle of violence would be reinforced. A merely retributive approach, which sought a victory for one or other party, would inevitably fail to get to the truth of a situation. Such a system could not ultimately encourage offenders to take personal responsibility for their actions.

In all this the Penitentials were of course drawing upon a rich tradition. Restoration was the primary focus of biblical just-

ice systems. Despite the widely popular misuse of the concept of *lex talionis*, the law of proportionality, as expressed in the notion 'an eye for an eye,' biblical tradition had a long-standing restorative focus. It was based on the need to seek 'shalom' – the peace and well being of the whole people. Shalom was not simply understood as the absence of conflict. It was construed as peace combined with justice and right relationships. The Law was there to seek, protect and promote shalom. Coupled with shalom was the need to renew and restore the sacred covenant, which the people had with Yahweh. Crime always broke this sacred bond which then needed repairing. As a further need to temper community response, sanctuary became an essential element of justice, as did the special protection of the poor, marginalised, the dispossessed, widows and orphans. The Years of Jubilee, when debts were forgiven, also sought to bring mercy, healing, new life and a fresh start to their processes of justice.

There are, I believe, strong resonances of this biblical approach to repentance in the Penitentials and more particularly in their approach to assigning penances. It was firmly within this theological framework that they made use of Cassian's so-called 'principle of contraries'. According to this approach, each penitent required the undivided, professional attention of the monastic *anamchara* in order that the precise kind of penitential activity would be found to re-orient him or her away from wrongful choices. For this reason, Columbanus recommends that 'spiritual doctors treat with diverse kinds of cures the wounds of souls' and that they 'compound their medicines' after the style of 'doctors of the body'. (Co.B.pr). To the fore here are the diversity and the detail of the acts of satisfaction. These are to be individually tailored according to the individual and to their specific requirements.

In practice, there were several ways in which penances could be thus tailored. Among these were the 'grading' of prescribed penances according to age, health, gender and clerical status. Penance would typically be given using the principle of contraries as a guide and basis for diagnosing the underlying vices and the corresponding virtues. Placed within Cassian's framework acts of penance would become at least theoretically acts of reparation (Cu.pr.1). Despite the oft-repeated criticism that Celtic penance encouraged an unhealthy individualism, the fact remains that those penances, which encouraged the penitent to

make satisfaction to the 'victim', actually enhanced the social and restorative dimensions of reconciliation. In this respect I believe it was an echo of the collective solidarity that emerged out of the events of the first Easter and out of God's gesture of supreme compassion and forgiveness for his people. There, forgiveness had not only a galvanising but also a reparative and healing or 'making whole' effect. As in the case of Jesus' own earthly ministry (such as the healing of the paralytic Mk 2:5-12) forgiveness of sin was clearly linked with healing in the life of the primitive church. 'Confess your sins to one another' advises James 'that you may be healed' (James 5:16).

It is this combination of reparative, restorative and re-integrative effects that has come to be described in more contemporary language as *reconciliation*. But the word is often deceptive in modern usage. Not infrequently it is used to describe the bringing together of warring factions or a new meeting of minds between erstwhile enemies. This is patently not the case in the relationship of God to humanity. While human beings may frequently err and fall short of the goals that they have set themselves, Christian teaching holds that the Father always remains constant and faithful. It is true of course that the original sense of the Greek term *katallagé* is of God reconciling all humankind indeed all of the cosmos to himself. Human beings are not 'actively' involved in this process, instead they are 'granted' reconciliation. (On this point the Reformers were of course right to insist when they underscored the assertion that justification is not the result of human efforts or of the particular merits of the individual but it is the fruit rather of he who won eternal life for all.) But the Christian tradition has always had a sense that justification is achieved and made real by human beings' co-operation with divine grace and that it does not therefore remain purely extrinsic to the human person. The transformation of the person into the image of the Son is a co-operative task. It was for this reason that Jesus opened his public ministry with the clarion call '*metanoieté!*' 'Repent and believe in the good news' (Mk 1:15). The joyful good tidings of Jesus' kingdom message are therefore an urgent summons to *metanoia* or a change of heart. The coming of that kingdom in the person, the life, the ministry and the witness of Jesus of Nazareth creates an awareness of the absolute need for God in the human heart. In the gospels, Jesus' life and ministry are in themselves a call to conversion. They are, for all who en-

counter him, a summons to abandon sin, to turn around, to reorient their life toward the truth and freedom of the kingdom of God and to restore its reign concretely both in their own life and in the lives of others.

Already too in the prophetic tradition the Hebrew term *shub* had conveyed the sense of a dramatic change of direction as well as a restoration of familial intimacy and a 'returning home' like the return of the prodigal son in Jesus' timeless parable. This meant that conversion was fundamentally about the re-establishment or restoration of the dialogue of love between God and human beings, both individually and in the community. This idea is also captured in the notion of the *ruah* Yahweh in Ezekiel, which breathes new life into what have become 'dry bones'. The dry bones afflicted by the desiccation of sin are in consequence revitalised and raised to new life. The 'change of heart', which the prophets and the psalmists unceasingly call for, is that kind of dramatic event which although rooted in personal conversion is ultimately restorative not only of the individual but of an entire community.

It is of course true that the penitentialists did not exploit to its full potential the restorative dimension of their theology of 'cure by contraries' and too often resorted to the more easily weighted and calculated days, weeks or even years of fasting. But this penance did, at least in theory, aim at a rehabilitation of the whole person and at undoing the more far-reaching effects of sin both individual and collective. In this regard the preponderance of medicinal language is also instructive. Columbanus portrays the *anamchara* as a 'spiritual doctor' who enables cure to take place. Similarly, Cummean's text is so replete with this imagery that it styles itself as a treatise on the 'remedies of wounds' and it is only later that one discovers that these 'wounds' are moral rather than physical. Even the so-called Bigotian text, which is perhaps more given than others to the language of judgement and retribution, reminds its readers that confessors are 'healers of souls' and as such they will necessarily pay great attention to age, sex, moral strength, instruction and personal disposition before deciding upon a penance. And likewise there is a reminder that the soul-friend's final decision must be reasonable; given neither to an undue leniency, on the one hand, nor to a disproportionate severity, on the other. 'Wise men in regulating penance are to look carefully also to this, not to punish with the

rod a crime worthy of the sword nor to smite with the sword a sin worthy of the rod.' (Bl.pr.3)

The essence of the good penance then for the penitential authors is that it be, at once, both salutary and suitable. One should not act arbitrarily when assigning penances but instead make a prudent and just decision. The good penance, after all, is to be but an incarnation of the principle of contraries. In other words, any interior change of heart has to find real and meaningful expression in external attitudes and actions. And so, in and through the importance that they attach to the metaphor of healing and of the 'principle of contraries', the penitentialists very clearly seek to shift the focus on to the reparative and restorative dimensions of repentance.

Of course one cannot get away from the fact that, Irish penitential theory and practice is very much part of an ascetic tradition. Building upon the tradition of the Desert Fathers and drawing also upon the indigenous, predecessor culture, it laid down very rigorous penitential prescriptions and, as we have already noted, too often honoured the principle of contraries in theory rather than practice. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving gradually became the preferred acts of penance and gained near universal dominance. But looked at in another way, these might be described as the traditional 'staples' of a regime, which nonetheless aimed at a holistic programme of repentance and recovery. Fasting demonstrated sincerity of purpose, prayer adherence and attachment to Christ and almsgiving and charitable works underlined the restorative dimension. In the Penitentials there could be no dichotomy between conversion of heart and conversion of life. In other words, asceticism was not to be construed as an alternative to restorative justice but as an important ally and aid. Prayer and fasting in this scheme of things would become the penitential grammar of a new moral life on to which the penitentialists would graft the various other-centred exercises depending on the exigencies of the particular situation.

In a very real sense this form of asceticism and penitential discipline looked forward rather than backward. Throughout the penitential literature there is a constant striving and searching for the equilibrium between undoing harm and renewing commitment. A case in point is the Old Irish text which states that the aim of the penitential is for 'annulling and remedying'. It is never simply a question of 'wiping the slate clean' by re-

moving or annulling the negative element. There has also to be a parallel process, of engagement or re-engagement with the moral life. (Co.Inst.X. Cf Gal 2:20)

The penitent who engaged in ascetic practices was not demonstrating what 'they could do' for God, but was instead recalling the gospel imperative to go and make peace with one's brother before being reconciled at the altar. This attitude to forgiveness and reconciliation, far from being an impoverishing one, served I believe to enrich, liberate and render life more heroic. It was a way of looking at things more honestly and realistically and of not getting enmeshed with false 'securities'. To the protagonists of Irish monasticism penance would have lost all meaning were it simply used as a charm, either to escape reality or else merely to fulfil the terms of a punishment. Instead, it had to be truly re-orienting and genuinely restorative.

A final two facets of the Penitentials susceptible to making a contribution to the contemporary debate on reconciliation are their insistence on candour and honesty, on the one hand, and genuine readiness to change, on the other. For the monastic fathers honesty, truth and a willingness to acknowledge the reality of failure are pre-requisites on the path to *metanoia*. They are also of course a *sine qua non* for contemporary recovery programmes and conflict resolution scenarios. A decisive moment of acceptance of reality and of the need for assistance from without is essential. Recovery entails a commitment to the truth and to an attitude of honesty. The church as a community of believers has a responsibility to provide the dynamic context of faith, hope and love where all are given the opportunity to begin and nourish their individual and collective recovery from sin.

Truthfulness and openness are thus starting points for both the individual and collective processes of reconciliation. For this reason rituals that gloss over, or somehow fail to get to grips with, a real and integral admission of guilt are of dubious value, and indeed may even be counterproductive insofar as they cheapen and trivialise what should be a profound and meaningful moment. For this reason too, I think we have begun to rediscover ways in which repentance can take place within the setting of the community at prayer. These rituals tend to underline our belief that the way in which we seek reconciliation with God is in and through reconciliation with his others. But the essential components of personal honesty and disclosure remain. It is

only in naming and owning fault that conversion becomes real. For the penitentialists the moment of confession and conversion was a very profound time of healing and it could no more be adequately fulfilled by a vague or generalised expression of remorse than a physical cure from illness could be effected by a superficial or incomplete medical examination.

In analogous ways, perhaps communities, societies and cultures also need to make a decisive break with the sinful past in order to recover collectively from the poisonous effects of sin. In mid 1990s South Africa, for instance, the collapse of apartheid left behind a legacy of distrust and hurt. By way of a remedy the old National Party favoured a Reconciliation Commission, whereas the African National Congress (ANC) sought nothing less than a painstaking investigation of the truth. The resultant comprise, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, although not entirely unflawed, provided a much needed cathartic process and in its very name gave expression to a basic pre-requisite for the healing of collective hurt. Confession, admission and acknowledgement of responsibility and ultimately of sin are necessary purgatives, purifying and ultimately healing acts whether an individual or an entire community undertakes them.

A second condition in the penitential literature is some kind of interior readiness for moral renewal. In classical theological language this might have been described as a 'firm purpose of amendment'. What was meant here was a realisation that conversion entailed personal and, on occasion, collective effort to overcome the effects of evil, whether from within or from without. No penitent in the Irish monastic discipline could have been in any doubt that what was being demanded of them was genuine physical commitment and engagement. Of course, at a purely theological level, the wholly gratuitous nature of God's pardon was unquestioned. But there was also a clear recognition that human beings do not experience themselves solely at a spiritual level. Accounts of Jesus' ministry in the gospels frequently attest to the same insight. In one well known episode a paralytic's friends are asked by Jesus 'Which is easier to do - to say to this man your sins are forgiven or to say get up take up your bed and go home?' Clearly the first option is the easier since forgiveness is not readily susceptible to external verification. The episode ends, however, with Jesus summoning the sick man to his feet and his mobility being thus restored. Morally the paralytic had

already been healed by the Jesus' words of forgiveness; humanly it became much easier to accept this when it found a resonance in his physical cure.

Grace of course can never be purchased, forgiveness cannot be earned but neither can we ignore the serious duty of reparation, the need to reconstruct our lives and the obligation to undo the hurt and the harm we have visited on others. There is an inescapable logic in that sin, and those effects of sin that are primarily physical in expression, should be countered in a physical and tangible way. For en-fleshed human beings it makes sense that the entire human person, body, mind and spirit should be somehow engaged in the process of conversion and reparation for the wrong which has been done. The biblical example of Zaccheus is instructive here: 'Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold' (Lk 19:8). The Penitentials' adoption of the traditional forms of penance in prayer, fasting and almsgiving gives expression to ancient ecclesial wisdom, which directed penance toward outreach, concern, and support for others.

A recent article in a South American religious journal speaks of the danger of contemporary Chileans becoming 'orphans of memory', since collectively as a nation they have failed to come to a shared remembering of the 1973 *coup d'état* and its aftermath.⁵ The danger is that society would simply acquiesce into an uneasy peace built upon collective amnesia in the hope that somehow deep wounds and societal divisions might somehow disappear. But the near universal experience of conflict resolution projects is that true healing just cannot be achieved in this way. Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz, a German Lutheran theologian who has written compellingly on the holocaust and the lessons it holds for us suggests, that there is much more wisdom in the Jewish proverb 'Forgotten prolongs captivity. Remembering is the secret of redemption,' than in the popular, adage 'forgive and forget'. He speaks of the 're-remembering' in the sense of bringing together the members and pieces of something that was once complete; a restoration of what has been lost and a joining together of what had been broken.⁶ Remembering for him is therefore a process, which calls to mind the deepest con-

5. Hurtado, P., ¿Huérfanos de Memoria? *Mensaje*, Vol 52, Santiago Chile, September, 2003, 30-34.

6. Muller-Fahrenholz, G., *The Art of Forgiveness*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1996, 122ff.

victions and possibilities of people, encourages them to heal forms of dismemberment and to work toward a better more integrated society. Confession, admission and acknowledgement of responsibility and ultimately of sin are therefore necessary purgative, purifying and ultimately healing acts, but humanly the process is incomplete until they spill over into restorative and reparative action. It is my belief that the Penitentials, for all their severity, not only championed the confession of fault as a profoundly healing and necessary experience but did so in a way which sought to re-member, in the aforementioned sense of reintegrating what is broken and fragmented. It has been suggested that an unfortunate effect of Christianity aligning itself with Roman law was that it essentially became a proponent of punishment and retribution and lost sight of the rich biblical restorative tradition.⁷ Whatever the validity of that critique, it would seem fair to say that a disproportionate emphasis on absolution has been to the detriment of the notions of satisfaction and amendment, and perhaps left our rituals of repentance themselves open to the charge of acquiescing in amnesia.

The time would therefore seem ripe for a rediscovery of the restorative dimension in these rituals in a manner that addresses both individual and collective needs. It is my belief that this quest can profit from the inspiration and insight of the Penitentials, which proved to be such a formative influence in our tradition. Like those western executives in Japan who saw the need to give physical expression to their contrite and repentant state, perhaps the time has come to nudge our rituals beyond verbal and token expressions and toward concrete acts of reconciliation and restoration.

7. Hadley, M., *The Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice*, New York University Press, Albany, 2001, chapter 3.