

## “A Fifteenth-Century Camaldolese *Sermo Modernus* on True and False Penance”

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### *Introduction*

The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 required every Catholic conscious of having committed serious sin to receive the sacrament of penance annually. This was a watershed in the history of the sacrament and pastoral care more generally, as for the first time it formalized at the highest level of church authority the requirement for the individual to confess their sins at the very least annually to a priest. The new requirement demanded that individual priests be prepared to hear confessions with knowledge and sensitivity, and at the very least be able to instruct the penitent of the appropriate penances for the sins they confessed. Furthermore, effectiveness as a confessor implied not only a practical knowledge of some canon law, but also the ability to discern a penitent’s sincerity, along with the personal and societal circumstances surrounding their sins. Not surprisingly, a large literature grew up in the later middle ages to assist priests in this crucial aspect of their pastoral role.<sup>1</sup> One hitherto overlooked contribution to this literature within the

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<sup>1</sup> For the state of the scholarly issues and literature on this vast subject, see Abigail Firey, “Introduction”, and R. Emmet Mclaughlin, “Truth, Tradition, and History: The Historiography of High/Late Medieval and Early Modern Penance” in Abigail Firey (ed), *A New History of Penance* (London: Brill, 2008), pp. 1-18 and 19-72; Peter Biller, “Confession in the Middle Ages: Introduction” in Peter Biller and A.J. Minnis (eds), *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages* (York: Boydell and Brewer, 1998), pp. 3-33.

Camaldolese tradition has been the work of John-Jerome of Prague (1368-1440). His sermons on penance represent concise guides for a wide clerical audience in need of practical advice in the confessional. John-Jerome's pastoral instruction for the actual application of the sacrament provides valuable insights into how the theology of penance was lived out in the fifteenth century. In his sermons we can also see the foundation of part of his wider program of ecclesiastical reform.

*The Career of John-Jerome of Prague (1368-1440)*

The Camaldolese John-Jerome of Prague enjoyed an international reputation as a reformer due to decades of active work in the church in eastern Europe and Italy. Before coming to Camaldoli in 1413 John-Jerome had led a distinguished career as a canon lawyer and Premonstratensian abbot, missionary in Lithuania, and personal chaplain to King Wladislaus Jagiello of Poland. After leaving the Premonstratensians to take up life as a Camaldolese in Italy in 1413, he soon became active in reform efforts within the order as a *visitor*. For many years he was Elder of the Hermitage at Camaldoli, produced numerous writings for the hermits in his care, and preached two sermons on reform at the Council of Pavia-Siena in 1423-24. After attending and preaching at the Council of Basel and serving on a delegation of the council to Poland, he lived his remaining years at the Camaldolese house of San Michele in Murano near Venice.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of his career, including his training as a canon lawyer, see William P. Hyland, "John-Jerome of Prague: Portrait of a Fifteenth Century Camaldolese" in *American Benedictine Review* 46 (1995) pp. 308-334; and Silvia Nocentini,

*The Lenten Way of Salvation and Sermon on True and False Penance*

In almost all of his writings John-Jerome is very concerned with the reality of sin in the lives of Christian men and women. The remedy for sin, as he sees it, is the frequent and heartfelt use of the Sacrament of Penance. His most extensive treatment of this subject can be found in two works. The first is called “An Especially Helpful Modern Sermon on True and False Penance” (*Sermo Modernus et Valde Utilis de Vera et de Falsa Poenitentia*), and is dated 1430.<sup>3</sup> The second is a compilation from 1436 entitled *The Lenten Way of Salvation (Quadragesima Salutis)*, a still unedited collection of sermons for everyday of Lent.<sup>4</sup>

John-Jerome wrote the *Quadragesima Salutis* at the request of a monk in Poland. As he mentions in the prologue of the work, it is meant to complement two sermon collections he had written decades earlier while serving as a royal chaplain at the Polish court.<sup>5</sup> The *Quadragesima salutis* is organized in the following manner.

Beginning with the first Book of Maccabees, John-Jerome begins each sermon with

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“Hieronymus de Praga”, in Elisabetta Guerrieri, *Clavis degli Autori Camaldolesi (Secoli XI-XVI)*. (Firenze: Sismel, Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2012), pp. 90-100.

<sup>3</sup> This article will quote from the printed edition found in an appendix edited by the authors in *Annales Camaldulenses*, Johannes Mittarelli and Anselmus Costadoni, (Venice, 1773), IX, pp. 919-940. (Henceforth *Sermo*) Manuscript versions are found in Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale, C.S.D. 7 886, foll. 47r-54v; Camaldoli, Biblioteca del Monastero. Fondo S. Michele di Murano. Ms. 1110, fols. 171r-178v.

<sup>4</sup> Cracow. Cathedral Archive., Latin. Ms. 150. For a description of the manuscript, see Polkowski, *Katalog Rekopisów Katedry Krakow*, (*Archiwum do dziejów Literatury I Oswiaty w polsce*, (Cracow: Nakladem Akademii Umiejetnosci) Tom. III pp. 107-108.

<sup>5</sup> See Hyland, “John-Jerome of Prague”, p. 319. For a discussion of the two earlier sermon collections, see William P. Hyland, “Abbot John-Jerome of Prague: Preaching and Reform in Early Fifteenth Century Poland”, in *Analecta Praemonstratensia* 80 (2004), pp. 5-42.

an Old Testament passage, and follows that with a reading from the Gospels. He then proceeds to interpret the Old Testament passage allegorically, in the light of the New Testament reading. For example, John-Jerome interprets the military victory of Judas Maccabaeus over the pagan Greeks as a prefiguration of the Christian victory over demons through the daily fasting of Lenten discipline.<sup>6</sup> He then moves on to the episode of the paralytic boy who is cured by Christ, and identifies that paralytic boy as a metaphor for sinners, in need of spiritual healing.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout this sermon collection, John-Jerome stresses the complete dependence of the human person on God. One cannot do anything good without God's grace. Since we all sin almost constantly (*assidue*), penance is needed frequently. In sermon after sermon, the Camaldolese preacher points out that healing by Christ is linked to sincere repentance and the avoidance of further sin. It is not enough to feel sad about sin: one must confess with sincerity and determined purpose to emend one's life. The whole purpose of the Church as he sees it is to help sinners return to God.

Much of the material about penance in the *Quadragesima salutis*, arranged as it is in the form of scriptural exegesis, is taken from the earlier *Sermo Modernus* which he composed on the subject in 1430 at the hermitage in Camaldoli. It is in this *Sermo Modernus* that John-Jerome presented his most systematic treatment of sin, confession and penance, reflecting his own training in canon law. The sermon was written at the request of Bishop Stanislaus II Pawloski of Plock in Masovia, Poland.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Quadragesima salutis*, f. 139v.

<sup>7</sup> *Quadragesima salutis*, f. 140r.

<sup>8</sup> *Sermo*, p. 940.

Stanislaus had become bishop in December of 1425, and had previously been an archdeacon of the Church of Plock before being elevated to the episcopate.<sup>9</sup> John-Jerome undoubtedly had met many of the future leaders of the Polish Church during his years as a royal chaplain in Cracow. The fact that bishop Stanislaus requested such a work from John-Jerome, now a Camaldolese hermit in Italy, demonstrates that John-Jerome had kept in touch with many of his former Polish contacts, and that the latter continued to hold him in high esteem as a preacher and a canonist. This helps explain further why the Council of Basel chose to include John-Jerome as part of its delegation to the Polish king and bishops in 1433.

Although baptism is certainly recognized as a prerequisite for the Christian life, it is clear that John-Jerome views penance, rather than the Eucharist, as the primary and indispensable means to achieve personal and hence societal reform. In his emphasis on the redemptive value of the sacrament of penance, John-Jerome was by no means unique. By the time he compiled this sermon in 1430, a vast literature already existed on this subject and continued to grow, including sermons, devotional aids, and summaries ( *summae*) for confessors.<sup>10</sup> A marked feature of this literature was the scholastic tendency to break the subject down into various categories and divisions for a more thorough analysis, and John-Jerome, in his choice of the form of the *sermo modernus*, was no exception to this.

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<sup>9</sup> Plock, in the region of Masovia, was a suffragan see of Gniezno. Stanislaus was bishop from December 29, 1425 to April 29, 1439. See Konrad Eubel, *Hierarchia Catholica Medii et Recentioris Aevi*, (Regensburg: Monastery Library, 1913) vol 1, p. 423.

<sup>10</sup> For a thorough treatment of the various types of penitential literature available in the fifteenth century, see Thomas Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 28-53.

The term *sermo modernus* was actually used by late medieval authors to describe a particular sermon form that was ultimately derived from the scholastic methodology common to all the subjects in the medieval universities. As described in numerous preaching manuals known as “the skills needed for preaching” (*artes praedicandi*), the format of this type of discourse usually included a theme, followed by various distinctions and subdistinctions, demonstrating, as Siegfried Wenzel writes, “the urge to divide concepts into parts and order the latter in a numbered sequence.”<sup>11</sup> While there was variety among the hundreds of models given, and in their individual expressions, Wenzel notes the following common features: 1) the announcement of the theme; 2) a prologue, culminating in a prayer for assistance; 3) repetition of the theme; 4) a bridge passage or 5) longer thematic introduction; 6) the division of the theme; 7) confirmation and further explanation of the division through introducing 8) subdivisions; 9) a brief summation; and finally 10) a closing formula, essentially a prayer.<sup>12</sup>

John-Jerome followed this formula with a statement of his thema with biblical citation, and a division of his subject into three parts; these in turn contained subdivisions, with a brief concluding summation. While it is possible the whole sermon could have been given orally, it really is meant, given its level of detail, to provide practical guidance for confessors and those training them. The many references to the Fathers also would have presented useful texts for shorter sermons and exhortations on the various aspects of penance. John-Jerome drew

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<sup>11</sup> Siegfried Wenzel, *Medieval 'Artes Praedicandi': A Synthesis of Scholastic Sermon Structure* (University of Toronto Press, 2015), p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> Siegfried Wenzel, *Medieval 'Artes Praedicandi'*, p. 48.

heavily on Gratian's *Decretum* for his teachings and patristic quotations, and to a lesser degree on the later Decretals.<sup>13</sup> The lone scholastic theologian he would cite is Thomas Aquinas, whose teaching in general, as we shall see, he tended to follow.<sup>14</sup>

Turning to the Sermon itself, the central purpose of the sermon is to show that penance is the primary means for the Christian to achieve salvation. In the prologue, the starting point of John-Jerome's analysis and theme is Christ's statement in the Gospel of Luke: *No, I say to you: but unless you shall do penance, you shall all likewise perish* (Luke 13:3). John-Jerome acknowledges that despite the clear and authoritative directive of Christ in this matter, it is human nature not to rejoice at the thought of doing penance.<sup>15</sup> Despite (or perhaps because of) this reluctance, however, our mortal human nature is always in need of improvement. The true justice of the perfect is that they never presume to be perfect. No one is so perfect and holy that she/he should not desire to become more holy. Citing the *Ethics* of Aristotle, the fathers Hilary, Ambrose and Augustine, and most prominently Gratian's *Decretum* in support of his arguments, the Camaldolese stresses that it is only in the afterlife that divine justice and human perfection will be manifest. The

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<sup>13</sup> For Gratian on penance, see Atria A. Larson, *Master of Penance: Gratian and the Development of Penitential Thought and Law in the Twelfth Century* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014). For the development of penitential theology and law, see Joseph Goering, "The Scholastic Turn (1100-1500): Penitential Theology and Law in the Schools" in *A New History of Penance*, pp. 219-237.

<sup>14</sup> The most recent study of Thomas Aquinas on this subject is Eric Luetjen, *Sacramental Forgiveness as a Gift of God: Thomas Aquinas on the Sacrament of Penance* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> "Nemo est de nobis, qui se ad opus honoris gaudeat incitari." *Sermo*, p. 919.

prospect of future punishment for sins is among the greatest incitements to do penance while one is still on this earth.<sup>16</sup>

John-Jerome follows Augustine and the *Decretum* in asserting that baptism is not enough to save a Christian from damnation, “for without penance baptism profited no one, who sinned of his own free will.”<sup>17</sup> Since people continue to sin constantly (*assidue*) after baptism, constant (*assidue*) penance is necessary. Even an infant is not without sin for a whole day upon the earth, and from morning until night the soul leads a person into vain and carnal sins. According to John-Jerome, “it is penance alone which liberates us from eternal death.”<sup>18</sup> The prologue then ends with the customary invocation of the aid of the Virgin Mary through the *Ave Maria*.

The subsequent division of the sermon into three parts is meant to enhance clarity for the subject, as well as provide a logical progression. Thus the basic division of the subject is into divine and human penance, with the former being the subject of the first formal part of the sermon. In this first section, divine penance is composed of exterior and interior aspects. The second and third parts of the sermon concern human penance, which can be divided into two parts, namely that imposed by the priest (*ex parte sacerdotis imponentis*), and that accomplished by the penitent himself (*ex parte poenitentis suscipientis*).<sup>19</sup> The first part of human penance, which could be called the sacerdotal aspect of penance, is further subdivided into solemn,

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<sup>16</sup> As John-Jerome states about divine judgment and the afterlife: “Et istud maximum juvamen ad poenitentiam, quia dum homo cogitat supplicia malis, et praemia bonis esse parata, movetur ad agenda poenitentiam.” *Sermo*, p. 920.

<sup>17</sup> “Nam sine poenitentia nulli profuit Baptismus, qui peccavit spontaneous.” *Sermo*. P. 921. Before this passage from Gratian’s *Decretum de Poenitentia*, John-Jerome had cited “Augustinus in libro de Utilitate agenda poenitentiae.”

<sup>18</sup> “Sola namque poenitentia est, quae nos a morte aeterna liberat.” *Sermo*, p. 921.

<sup>19</sup> *Sermo*, p. 925.



public and private. Private penance can in turn be divided into true or false varieties. Then penance from the recipient's perspective can be divided into functions of contrition, confession, and satisfaction, and each of these functions in turn can be subdivided even further. Although these various divisions can seem at first cumbersome and bewilderingly complex to the modern reader, they do in fact provide an ordered and useful approach to a sacrament whose practical application and theological foundations were a subject of intense discussion and controversy throughout the late Middle Ages.

In the first part of the sermon, John-Jerome describes the need for penance from the point of view of divine grace and forgiveness. Citing the *Decretum* and Pope Innocent III, he essentially seeks to prove the teaching of Augustine that penance is the medicine provided by God for the cure of sin and all that ails our souls.<sup>20</sup> Moving masterfully through the text of the *Decretum* and citing the numerous references to the Church Fathers along the way, he lists the thirteen "good things that lead human beings to such an authentic and divine penance (*bona quae inducunt homines ad istam veram et divinam penitentiam*)."<sup>21</sup> These are: 1) divine grace, by which people are called to penance; 2) the divine image (*imago divina*), which is called *synderesis*, in which human beings were made; 3) the four virtues found in the human soul, namely prudence, temperance, wisdom and fortitude; 4) divine fear, namely fear of eternal punishment; 5) the shortness of human life; 6) infirmity of the body; 7) old age and gradual failure of the senses; 8) perception of the passing nature of this world; 9) the witness of the Sacred Scriptures to the fate of those who do not repent

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<sup>20</sup> *Sermo*, pp. 921-923.

<sup>21</sup> *Sermo*, p. 923.

in this life; 10) recalling to mind the glory of the saints, and the desire to be with them; 11) recognition that the divine yoke is actually light, and that eternal grace comes quickly from the merciful judge to those who seek it; 12) recognition that there is no better way than penance to secure eternal life; and 13) the glorious benefits that will come to those who are with Christ eternally, and the hope of these things in the world to come.<sup>22</sup> This list is clearly meant as a source for preachers and confessors to draw upon in their own efforts to exhort their flocks to both avail themselves of God's mercy through the sacrament of penance, and to take the sacrament seriously as a divinely-supplied remedy for their spiritual condition.

The second part of the sermon proceeds to discuss the information needed by the priest who administers the sacrament. John-Jerome does briefly discuss the ancient forms of solemn and public penance, and the dramatic punishments often prescribed for "criminal sins" in the medieval canons and penitentials.<sup>23</sup> He then describes in detail the various severe penances which are assigned to "mortal sins" in the canons, and warns that a confessor must be very cautious about judging sins to be mortal. A notable feature of this detailed discussion is the more severe penances imposed on priests and bishops, respectively, for serious sins, than on the laity.

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<sup>22</sup> *Sermo*, pp. 923-925.

<sup>23</sup> He enumerates the twelve criminal sins: 1) *errare in fide catholica* 2) *Sodomia, quae est peccatum contra naturam*; 3) *homicidium voluntarium, quod est terribilius omni peccato*; 4) *crimen laesae majestatis*; 5) *crimen sacrilegii*; 6) *incestus*; 7) *conspiratio vel secta*; 8) *adulterium notorium*; 9) *falsum testimonium*; 10) *crimen simoniae*; 11) *solemne perjuium*; and 12) *crimen usurae*. *Sermo*, pp. 927-928.

John-Jerome's main focus, however, is on the sacrament of penance in the form most common in his own time, namely private confession to a priest,<sup>24</sup> and the respective role of priest and penitent in the sacrament will be the focus of the rest of his sermon. Although medieval theologians were in agreement that sacramental penance was necessary, and that confession to and absolution by a priest were integral parts of the sacrament, there were different schools of thought on the relative importance of the priest in the process of forgiveness. In the patristic and early medieval period, there was a consensus among theologians that forgiveness of sins was primarily a matter of doing works of expiation or satisfaction for one's sins following confession. By the thirteenth century contrition had become the central element for the penitent, reducing penitential exercises to a secondary role. Along with this trend, the meaning of the priest's role in penance was gradually being more carefully defined, and the significance of the sacerdotal role enhanced. As Thomas Tentler has noted, there was a tension in late medieval theories of penance between the contrition of the penitent as the most important part of penance on the one hand, and the need to confess to a priest.<sup>25</sup>

By John-Jerome's time three broad schools of thought existed on this question. Those who followed Peter Lombard saw the priest's role as essentially ratifying the contrition of the penitent and imposing the necessary penance. Theologians who followed Thomas Aquinas sought to combine the contrition of the penitent and the action of the priest in a causal unity that produced the sacramental

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<sup>24</sup> He gives the following definition of *poenitentia privata*: "...quae singulariter fit quotidie, quum aliquis confitetur alicui secrete Sacerdoti, et Sacerdos sibi imponit poenitentiam." *Sermo*, p. 928.

<sup>25</sup> Tentler, pp. 12-22.

grace of forgiveness. This school makes the priest's role indispensable, but only of equal importance to the contrition of the penitent. A third school, inspired by Duns Scotus, made the role of the priest of paramount importance, and stressed the priest's role to such an extent that some thinkers of this school spoke of penance as "the sacrament of absolution".<sup>26</sup>

John-Jerome seems to fit in best with the Thomist school, and he will actually quote Aquinas on contrition.<sup>27</sup> The Camaldolese, after citing various biblical passages which he believes mandate the confession of sins, and quotations from Ambrose, Augustine and Cassiodorus along these same lines, argues that if people do not confess their sins in this present life, they will be eternally damned.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, however, he rejects the Scotist view that the vague sadness a penitent feels for his sins, known as attrition (*attritio*), is a sufficient disposition for a penitent seeking the absolution of a priest.<sup>29</sup> John-Jerome stresses that there are differences between attrition (*attritio*) compunction (*compunctio*) and contrition (*contritio*). The first, attrition, is a light sadness for sins which comes and goes, while compunction is a stronger sadness based on fear, but also still transitory in nature. It is only through contrition, which is infused by grace into sinful persons and allows them to have an authentic and lasting detestation of their sins and a

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<sup>26</sup> Tentler, pp. 22-23.

<sup>27</sup> "Ergo prima est contritio, et illa est duplex, voluntatis et sensus, quia dum poenitens in voluntate detestatur peccatum, et in sensu dolet; qui dolor tantum potest augeri, ut deleat omnem culpam et poenam, ut probat beatus Thomas de Aquino libro VI quia in sola contritione remittuntur peccata." *Sermo*, p. 934.

<sup>28</sup> "Nam qui non vult confiteri in hac vita, confitebitur in futura vita, cum Angeli, et omnes homines ac Diaboli audient eum, et tamen damnabitur in perpetuum, quia si semper viveret, semper peccaret." *Sermo*, p. 935.

<sup>29</sup> For Scotus on this point, see Tentler, p. 26.; also Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (New York, 1999), pp. 106-107.

sincere desire to leave these sins behind, that a person's sins can be forgiven. As he states, quoting Thomas Aquinas directly, "in contrition alone are sins remitted."<sup>30</sup>

Priests thus cannot absolve someone who is not contrite.<sup>31</sup>

John-Jerome, following the *Decretum* and Aquinas, does believe confession to a priest under normal circumstances is necessary, while acknowledging that in an emergency, when a person is on the verge of death, he can confess to a deacon or lay companion, and this will be valid because of the penitent's sincere desire to confess to a priest. He gives three reasons why vocal confession is necessary: 1) the Church commands it; and the authority of the Church cannot be vilified and scorned; 2) the shame engendered in confession is a large part of satisfaction for sins; and 3) the utility of vocal confession. For the first and third reasons he cites the authority of Augustine and the *Decretum*, and for the second the *Glossa Ordinaria* on Matthew.<sup>32</sup> Auricular confession of sins is thus the second essential aspect of true penance, following contrition.

With John-Jerome's emphasis on contrition and auricular confession, one might think that the priest had little to do except pronounce absolution. The confessor does, however, have a great deal to do with the third part of the process of

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<sup>30</sup> "...quia in sola contritione remittuntur peccata." *Sermo*, p. 933. See also p. 935 for the distinctions he makes between *attritio*, *compunctio* and *contritio*. In the *Quadragesima salutis*, ff. 328-329, John-Jerome would again inveigh against false contrition and stress that contrition is not authentic unless the penitent resolves to leave his sinful ways behind. As he writes on f. 328, "Christus servavit et veritatem doctrinae cum dixit *vade et amplius noli peccare*." For Aquinas on contrition, see Eric Luetjen, *Sacramental Forgiveness as a Gift of God*, especially pp. 56-58; and 142-155.

<sup>31</sup> *Sermo*, p. 934.

<sup>32</sup> *Sermo*, p. 934.

penance, namely the penitent's need to do satisfaction for his sins.<sup>33</sup> Satisfaction is so important that John-Jerome states that invalid penance occurs when the priestly confessor applies the wrong penalty for sins.<sup>34</sup> As he goes on to say, the complex system of penalties for various sins developed in canon law over the centuries was not in the present time always accessible or even comprehensible to many priests:

Therefore, for the sake of simple priests, who do not possess a supply of decrees and decretals, and even if they had them, would not understand them, it pleases me to describe here the many penances as determined in the decrees and decretals, so that they will know the true and canonical penance to impose on those who confess and are contrite.<sup>35</sup>

This passage demonstrates that John-Jerome is to some degree motivated by a desire to implement reform. Presumably he believed that Bishop Stanislaus intended to distribute at least parts of this sermon to his parochial clergy to aid them in the administration of the sacrament of penance, both to augment their

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<sup>33</sup> Thus, John-Jerome summarized the process of penance in three steps: 1) *in corde per contritionem*; 2) *in ore per confessionem*; and 3) *in opere per satisfactionem*. *Sermo*, pp. 933-934.

<sup>34</sup> "Falsa paenitentia est, quae non imponitur recte, sicut taxata est in Decretis." *Sermo*, p. 928.

<sup>35</sup> "Ideo propter Sacerdotes simplices, qui copiam Decretorum et Decretalium non habent; et si haberent, non intelligerent, placet mihi multas poenitentias taxatas in decretis et decretalibus describere, ut sciant veram et canonicam poenitentiam confessis et contritis imponere." *Sermo*, pp. 928-929.

working knowledge of the canons and to provide them with patristic quotations to use for exhortation. His remarks in this *sermo modernus* are thus not meant as a purely academic discourse on penance, but rather as a guide for a wide clerical audience that was apparently beyond the reach of the ponderous and expensive manuals and *summae* for confessors.

Given the practical purpose of this sermon, it is interesting to note what John-Jerome says about the whole question of satisfaction for sin. He repeats many of the ancient penances for mortal sin, including the extremely ascetical and long penances which are so characteristic of the early medieval penitential literature.<sup>36</sup> He encourages the use of the canons by the confessor, and warns that no one should condemn the holy canons and their severe prescriptions for sin. With this being said, however, it must also be acknowledged that there is no reason to believe that the vast majority of penitents were expected to perform such harsh penances.<sup>37</sup> Although undoubtedly some enthusiastic penitents did observe the strict ideals, it was by no means the norm in the fifteenth century. John-Jerome, like many authorities on the subject, repeats the penitential canons as if they were relevant, and then proceeds to modify them through the suggested use of indulgences. Besides indulgences, he gives a long list of circumstances that allow a confessor to mitigate the penances required by the penitential canons. These include the rank in

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<sup>36</sup> As one example, the basic penance for any mortal sin is to live seven years fasting on bread and water. For the early medieval penitential literature, see Rob Meens, "The Historiography of Early Medieval Penance", in *A New History of Penance*, pp. 73-96.

<sup>37</sup> As Tentler, p. 18, observes: "And persistent reference in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to the harsher norms of the canons does not mean, as we shall see later, that anyone was actually doing arduous penances."

society of the penitent, their age, financial situation, and degree of sincerity, local custom and circumstances, and many other reasons.<sup>38</sup>

Although he makes it clear that the confessor is meant to mitigate the canons in practice, John-Jerome also insists that the confessor must know the appropriate penalties so that he can inform the penitent what the penalty for their sins *should* be:

Nevertheless, the priest ought to add up all the mortal sins, which he has heard, compute the years [of penance], and say to the penitent: 'Behold how many years you should do penance, but your life would not extend this long; therefore I give to you such a penance, that at every moment of your life you should be humble and fast on weekdays when able on bread and water, unless you be infirm, or you say this many prayers; and I absolve you, and grant, that each and every indulgence will avail you from wherever they originate'.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> He lists: *dignitas, infirmitas, paupertas, complexio, consuetudo, status, societas, lacrymae, devotio, regionis et temporis qualitas, discretio et aetas, et aliae plures causae*. *Sermo*, p. 939.

<sup>39</sup> "Debet tamen sacerdos computare omnia peccata mortalia, quae audivit, et computare annos, et dicere poenitenti: Ecce tot annis deberes facere paenitentiam, sed vita tua non potest tantum extendi, ideo do tibi talem paenitentiam, quod omni tempore vitae tuae sis humilis, et jejunes qualibet vi feria pane et aqua, nisi sis infirmus, vel dicas tot orationes; et ego te absolvo, et concedo, quod valeant tibi omnes et singulae indulgentiae a quocumque fiant". *Sermo*. p. 939.



This insistence on the symbolic nature and power of the penitential canons fits in with much thought of the late medieval period, and demonstrates the enduring significance that the ancient authorities held for many, including John-Jerome. Although contrition was seen as the most important aspect of the sacrament, with regard to satisfaction the penitential canons remained as an ideal, albeit an anachronistic one, for many thinkers. Thomas Tentler mentions Andreas de Escobar , Astesanus, and Jacobus de Clusa as “reactionary” and “rigorists” who insisted upon the maintenance of the penitential canons. Tentler goes on to criticize those, including “even more liberal theologians”, who sought to maintain the symbolic value of the canons, and “in so talking they kept alive a rigoristic mentality, and preserved for scrupulous priests and penitents another limitation on the free and universal action of the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>40</sup> From the later perspective of the sixteenth century and beyond, one can see the limitations and ways this could have negative psychological results. From the perspective of many in the fifteenth century, however, the tendency of thinkers such as John-Jerome to stress the ancient penalties due for sin and at the same time to humanely mitigate these penalties would reinforce the reality of divine mercy and the consolation which was such a key element to the psychology of penance as they understood it. The idea that one was not totally free from the harsh penalties deserved by serious sin preserved the role of satisfaction, so important in the process of overcoming feelings of guilt. As John-Jerome noted in his sermon, the purpose of doing satisfaction for sins was to be reconciled to oneself, just as contrition reconciled one to God and confession to

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<sup>40</sup> Tentler, pp. 324-325.

the Church (*sic per contritionem reconciliatur Deo, per confessionem Ecclesiae, et per satisfactionem sibi ipsi*).<sup>41</sup>

At the close of his sermon, John-Jerome stresses that the sacrament of penance is a source of consolation for the forgiven sinner. Although the confessor is there to point out the need for personal reform, he is also meant to assure the penitent that through the means of this special sacrament, his sins and faults are forgiven. The priest is to be discrete and benevolent, trustworthy and sincere, and as John-Jerome says in the very last words of the sermon:

And the priest ought to comfort the penitent  
in hope, faith and charity, and promise to him  
remission of all his sins, and eternal life.<sup>42</sup>

### *Penance and Church Reform*

In a sermon given on church reform at the Council of Pavia-Siena in 1423, John-Jerome had placed the burden of moral reform on the backs of prelates who, he believed, valued material and worldly comforts and honors more than their spiritual responsibilities. The only way forward, he believed, was for the clergy to embrace the sacrament of penance themselves, and to model this for all the faithful. The only course of action was sincere repentance, prayer and fasting, “with the result that the Lord himself, who hears the pleas of the poor, will see fit to bring about from the

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<sup>41</sup> *Sermo*, p. 934. For a discussion of these and related issues in the English context, see Henry Ansgar Kelly, “Penitential Theology and Law at the Turn of the Fifteenth Century” in *A New History of Penance*, pp. 239-318.

<sup>42</sup> “Et debet confortare paenitentiam in spe, fide, et charitate, et promittere ei remissionem omnium peccatorum et vitam aeternam.” *Sermo*, p. 940.

arduous business of this council the intended result and aim.”<sup>43</sup> For John-Jerome, ecclesiastical reformation parallels the process of personal reformation as expressed in the sacrament of penance. Prelates must first display genuine contrition on behalf of the faithful through these public rituals of confession and satisfaction. This is to be followed by the next phase of penance, the correction of bad behavior. The two things that prevent this correction of clerical behavior are carnal pleasures but also clerical ignorance.<sup>44</sup>

Thus the remedy for the Church is the same as that for the individual sinner: knowledge of one’s own sin, sincere contrition and confession, and appropriate satisfaction, tempered by the mercy of God. For this to happen, whether in the privacy of the hermitage at Camaldoli or on the diocesan scale in Poland, John-Jerome drew on his legal and scholastic training to present to his friends and those under his pastoral care the means to enhance true penance as he and so many of his contemporaries understood it.

### *Conclusion*

The writings of John-Jerome of Prague on the sacrament of penance represent an important example of the widely-perceived need to produce useful guidance for priests in the confessional, and also, in this case, for those whose job it was to train them. The complex nature of the penitential canons as represented by the work of Gratian, and the reflections of theologians such as Thomas Aquinas,

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<sup>43</sup> Sermon quoted (p. 419) in William Patrick Hyland, “Reform Preaching and Despair at the Council of Pavia-Siena (1423-24)”, in *The Catholic Historical Review* 84 (1998) pp. 409-430. For the original, see *Annales Camaldulenses* IX, pp. 425-426.

<sup>44</sup> Hyland, “Reform Preaching and Despair”, p. 421.

needed to be made accessible to priests if the canons were to prove useful and fruitful in the pastoral life of the Church. In the writings of the Camaldolese John-Jerome of Prague, and in particular his "*Sermo Modernus* On True and False Penance", we see the efforts of a widely-experienced theologian, canonist and pastor explaining the practical and theoretical bases of the sacrament of penance, while demonstrating its importance as the foundation for ecclesiastical and personal reform.