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The Penitential Theology of the Homily of Repentance

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What does it mean to be penitent and repentant in light of the Reformation? This article unpacks one of the Homilies in light of other English texts concerning pastoral care.

'An Homily of Repentance, and of True Reconciliation unto God,' the nineteenth of the homilies in the second Book of Homilies, authoritatively sets forth for the reformed Church of England a theology of repentance grounded in the broadly Protestant understanding of justification *sola gratia et sola fide*. The admittedly scanty extant literature has also identified the influence of early sixteenth-century humanism on the Homilies. But previously unremarked on in the literature is whether the Homilies, and the Homily of Repentance in particular, demonstrate any theological continuity with the ascetical theology of the late medieval English pastoral tradition. This essay argues that alongside the Protestant rejection of much late medieval Catholic as well as contemporary Tridentine (Roman) Catholic penitential theology and praxis, the homily demonstrates continuity with this pre-Reformation pastoral tradition as it has been characterised by the twentieth-century English priest and ascetical theologian, Martin Thornton.[1]

The Books of Homilies

The first Book of Homilies, a collection of twelve sermons on various doctrinal subjects, was published in 1547 by the authority of Edward the Sixth and reintroduced (after the Marian reaction) by Elizabeth the First in 1559. After its reintroduction, the first Book was augmented by a second Book of Homilies published in 1563 and expanded in 1571, giving a total of twenty-one homilies in the second Book.[2] The Homilies reflect the pastoral concern of Thomas Cranmer, archbishop of Canterbury and chief architect of the reformation of the English Church during the reign

[1] Martin Thornton, *English Spirituality: An Outline of Ascetical Theology According to the English Pastoral Tradition*, (1986; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012),

[2] The two books (totalling thirty-three homilies) were not printed or bound together as one collection until 1623.

of Edward the Sixth, for sound doctrinal teaching in English.[3] In his book, *A Fruitful Exhortation: A Guide to the Homilies*, Gerald Bray notes that:

> Along with the Thirty-nine Articles, the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal, the two books of Homilies form part of the constitutive documents of the Church of England and are therefore of considerable importance for understanding both its history and its doctrine. The Reformers believed that preaching was the key to spreading their teachings, and the Homilies were intended to be the means by which ordinary people would come to understand what the Reformation was about.[4]

As part of a comprehensive and unified program of doctrinal and liturgical reform, the Articles of Religion grant doctrinal authority to the Homilies. Article XI, 'Of the Justification of Man,' endorses the doctrine of the third homily of the first Book, and Article XXXV enumerates the homilies of the Elizabethan book and endorses the Edwardine book, stating that the homilies of both collections 'contain a godly and wholesome Doctrine, and necessary for these times.' Furthermore, the Article orders that the Homilies 'be read in Churches by the Ministers, diligently and distinctly,' recalling the requirement of the Edwardian Injunctions that 'all parsons, vicars and curates shall read in the churches every Sunday one of the Homilies, which are and shall be for the purpose set forth by the King's authority,'[5] a requirement reintroduced by the Elizabethan Injunctions of 1559. However, despite their reformed doctrinal importance and their historical authority, in later years the Homilies fell into general disuse, and they are now largely unknown and little read in Anglican Churches.[6]

[3] Cranmer is known to have authored four, and possibly five, of the Homilies of the first Book.

[4] Gerald Bray, *A Fruitful Exhortation: A Guide to the Homilies* (London: Latimer Trust, 2014), 1.

[5] Walter Howard Frere and William McClure Kennedy, eds., *Visitation Articles and Injunctions of the Period of the Reformation*, vol. II, *1536–1558*, Alcuin Club Collections XV (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1910), 114–30. This is number 32 of the Injunctions.

[6] The Homilies were last edited by John Griffiths in 1859, with a (light) revision by Ian Robinson in 2006. In 2013, Nashotah House Press published a facsimile reprint of the 1852 edition of the entire Book(s) prepared for the Prayer-Book and Homily Society. Footstool Publications, an evangelical Anglican organisation, has published the Homilies in Griffith's annotated form online and are working on contemporary language versions of the Homilies (http://footstoolpublications.com/Homilies/index.htm).

An Homily of Repentance: A Sermon in Three Parts

'An Homily of Repentance' is actually three sermons under one heading. The first part commences with this potent statement:

> There is nothing that the Holy Ghost doth so much labour in all the Scriptures to beat into men's heads, as repentance, amendment of life, and speedy returning unto the Lord God of hosts. And no marvel why: for we do daily and hourly, by our wickedness and stubborn disobedience, horribly fall away from God, thereby purchasing unto ourselves (if he should deal with us according to his justice) eternal damnation. So that no doctrine is so necessary in the church of God, as is the doctrine of repentance and amendment of life.[7]

This first part of the Homily continues by setting forth the necessity of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, for 'there is none other way whereby the wrath of God may be pacified, and his anger assuaged, that the fierceness of his fury, and the plagues and destruction, which by his righteous judgment he had determined to bring upon us, may depart, be removed, and taken away.'[8] Repentance is 'a returning again of the whole man unto God, from whom we be fallen away by sin, '[9] to which sinners are moved by God himself, in order to obtain his mercy and be received again into his favor. The Homily continues with a consideration of repentance under four 'principal points': from what we must return (sin, false and erroneous belief, and superstition); to whom we must return (the Lord God, 'for he alone is the truth, and the fountain of all goodness'[10]); by whom we may be able to turn to God (Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between God and us); and the manner by which we are to return to God. Grace is emphasised throughout the Homily, though human effort is not wholly excluded. For instance, in returning to the Lord 'we must labour that we do return as far as unto him, and that we do never cease nor rest till we have apprehended and taken hold upon him' but 'this must be done by faith.'[11] We must return to God, and not to 'the creatures, or unto the inventions of men, or unto their own merits,'[12] clearly indicating a

[7] 'An Homily of Repentance, and of True Reconciliation unto God,' *The Book of Homilies* (London, 1852; repr. Nashotah House Press, 2013), 491.
[8] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 492.
[9] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 493.
[10] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 494.
[11] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 494.
[12] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 494.

rejection of the medieval penitentiary scheme. The Homily makes it clear that repentance can never be a work of ours by which we earn merit, but that it is the work of the Holy Spirit in the justified believer.[13]

In considering how to turn back to God, the Homily notes that we must return with our whole heart, so that God may rid us of hypocrisy. We are to approach God with 'a sincere and pure love of godliness, and of the true worshipping and service of God…forsaking all manner of things that are repugnant and contrary unto God's will.'[14] Because of the affections of the flesh, God bids us return with fasting, but not with 'a superstitious abstinence and choosing of meats, but a true discipline or taming of the flesh, whereby the nourishments of filthy lusts, and of stubborn contumacy and pride, may be withdrawn and plucked away.'[15] It seems likely, given the commendation of abstinence and fasting as an ordinance and commandment of God in another homily of the Elizabethan (second) Book, 'An Homily of Good Works. And First of Fasting,' that what is condemned here is fasting only as an outward act without inward mortification, rather than fasting *per se*; and by implication, the formal medieval scheme of penance and mortification is condemned as 'a superstitious…choosing.'

Citing several passages of Scripture that give examples, the Homily assures us that 'God is always ready to receive repentant sinners and welcome them back. He is gentle to those who humble themselves and shows them mercy as a parent would to his children…Forgiveness is freely offered to all who sincerely repent, however sinful they may have been,'[16] thus the errors of the Novationists and other rigorists who deny the forgiveness of post-baptismal sin are rejected.

The third part of the Homily considers the causes which should move us to repentance. First, God has commanded us in the Scriptures to repent. Second, God has promised forgiveness to those who truly repent and turn back to him. Third, because of the filthiness of sin and God's abhorrence of it, we should desire cleansing from its effects, particularly since that cleansing cost the blood of Jesus Christ. Fourth, because of the uncertainty of our lives, in which we are not assured of living 'another half quarter' of an hour, we should always seek to be at one with God. Finally, while the first part of the Homily of Repentance assures us that

[13] Caroline Stacey, 'Justification by Faith in the Two Books of Homilies (1547 and 1571),' *AThR* 83, no. 2 (2001): 275.
[14] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 495.
[15] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 496.
[16] Bray, *A Fruitful Exhortation*, 122.

repentance 'is never too late, so that it be true and earnest,'[17] the third part warns us not to presume on God's mercy by delaying repentance and amendment of life, lest by ignoring the call to repentance in the preaching of the Word and in the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit, the righteous judgments of God should come suddenly upon us.

The second part of the Homily considers four parts of repentance 'which, being set together, may be likened to an easy and short ladder, whereby we may climb from the bottomless pit of perdition, that we cast ourselves into by our daily offenses and grievous sins, up into the castle or tower of eternal and endless salvation.'[18] These four parts or steps to repentance are contrition of the heart, honest ('unfeigned') confession and acknowledgment of our sins to God, faith in the promises of God in Jesus Christ, and amendment of life—'a new life, in bringing forth fruits worthy of repentance.'[19]

By contrition, the first step of the ladder of repentance,[20] the Homily means that we must be genuinely sorry for our sins and must lament that we have grievously offended Almighty God, who so loved us that he gave his only begotten Son to die for us and for our redemption. In order to experience contrition, we must be attentive to reading and hearing the Scriptures, God's Word, which will bring us to conviction by compunction—the pricking of the conscience. The Homily warns that those who experience remorse over their sins but who neglect the reading and hearing of the Scriptures will be driven to despair, being unaware of the promises of God.

The second step of the ladder is a sincere confession of our sins to God, relying on the promises of God in the Scriptures to forgive those who confess their sins and to cleanse them from all unrighteousness.[21] Besides this confession, the Homily (citing James 5:16) notes another kind of confession that is likewise necessary, viz. the confession of sins to one another, particularly if relationships between people have been injured by hatred, rancor, grudges, or malice. Thus confession of sins to one another becomes a means of reconciliation, 'without which nothing that we do can be acceptable unto God'[22] (citing Matthew 5:23–24). The Homily

[17] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 492.
[18] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 502.
[19] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 507.
[20] I have followed Bray in denoting these as 'steps' of repentance rather than 'parts,' drawing on the language of the passage of the homily quoted, *supra*, which itself draws on the popularity of the ladder as a metaphor in medieval ascetical theology.
[21] 1 John 1:9.
[22] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 504.

explicitly rejects the interpretation of the counsel of the Epistle of James as establishing auricular confession to a priest, adducing texts from Duns Scotus and Augustine of Hippo, as well as the example of Nectarius[23] to demonstrate the error of requiring sacramental confession to a priest.

However, the Homily does not wholly reject private confession:

> I do not say, but that, if any do find themselves troubled in conscience, they may repair to their learned curate or pastor, or to some other godly learned man, and show the trouble and doubt of their conscience to them, that they may receive at their hand the comfortable salve of God's word: but it is against the true Christian liberty, that any man should be bound to the numbering of his sins, as it hath been used heretofore in the time of blindness and ignorance.[24]

This provision echoes the Exhortation to Communion in the Edwardine and the Elizabethan Prayer Books, in which those who are disquieted in conscience are exhorted to avail themselves of the private counsel and absolution of a 'dyscrete and learned priest' (1549) or a 'discreet and learned minister of God's Word' (1552, 1559).[25]

The third step of the ladder is faith, by which we apprehend and take hold of the promises of God in Jesus Christ. The Homily compares the repentance of Judas and of Peter, noting that both expressed contrition for their betrayals (Judas even confessed his!), but whereas Judas' lack of faith drove him to despair and suicide, Peter's faith in Jesus led to his forgiveness:

> It is evident and plain then, that although we be never so earnestly sorry for our sins, acknowledge and confess them; yet all these things shall be but means to bring us to utter desperation, except we do steadfastly

[23] According to Sozomen (*Ecclesiastical History*), Nectarius, bishop of Constantinople from 381 to 397, ended the practice of private confession at Constantinople after the rape by a deacon of a penitent who had remained behind in the church after her meeting with the presbyter-penitentiary.

[24] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 506.

[25] The echo reminds us that the intention of the English Reformers was that the Homilies be used in conjunction with the liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer, and that the Homilies and the Prayer Book, along with the Articles of Religion and the Ordinal, serve as a unified whole for the doctrine and liturgical praxis of the Church of England. Cf. Brian Hartley, 'The Liturgical Reordering of the *Ecclesia Anglicana*: Faithful Understanding in the Elizabethan Homilies of 1563,' *Anglican and Episcopal History* 76, no. 4 (December 2007): 489–519.

> believe that God our heavenly Father will, for his Son Jesus Christ's sake, pardon and forgive us our offenses and trespasses, and utterly put them out of remembrance in his sight.[26]

The fourth and final step of the ladder is amendment of life, which enables the repentant and forgiven sinner to bring forth the fruits of repentance. The Homily teaches that this means nothing less than newness of life, for those who 'truly repent must be clean altered and changed, they must become new creatures, they must be no more the same that they were before.'[27] Those who truly and humbly repent of their sins will not only receive 'the Physician of the soul, but also with a most fervent desire long for him. They will not only abstain from the sins of their former life, and from all other filthy vices, but also flee, eschew, and abhor all the occasions of them.'[28] As they once gave themselves to sin and 'uncleanness of life,' they must hereafter give themselves 'with all diligence' to purity of life and true godliness. From the scriptural examples of Zaccheus (Luke 19) and the sinful woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears (Luke 7), we learn that the true satisfaction that God requires for remission of the effects of sin is:

> that we cease from evil, and do good; and, if we have done any man wrong, to endeavor ourselves to make him true amends to the utmost of our power… This was commonly the penance that Christ enjoined sinners; Go thy way, and sin no more. Which penance we shall never be able to fulfill, without the special grace of him that doth say, Without me ye can do nothing.[29]

Here, as throughout the Homily, prevenient grace and the faith to trust God to act in us are emphasised.

The second part of 'An Homily of Repentance' criticises and decidedly rejects the medieval penitential scheme and the entire idea of sacramental penance. In the discussion of the third step of repentance, faith, the Homily criticises the threefold medieval scheme of contrition, confession, and satisfaction for its failure explicitly to include faith, suggesting that this scheme leads to despair. While the Homily overlooks the possibility that faith is implicit in the threefold scheme, the rejection of the medieval

[26] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 507.
[27] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 508.
[28] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 508.
[29] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 509.

penitential concept of satisfaction in the discussion of the fourth step (opposing it to 'the satisfaction that God requires') is percipient in its understanding of its subject.

Though not original to him, this threefold scheme of repentance was delineated by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica*, in his discussion of the sacrament of penance: 'the proximate matter of this sacrament consists in the acts of the penitent, the matter of which acts are the sins over which he grieves, which he confesses, and for which he satisfies' (III, Q. 84, Art. 2).[30] This teaching was canonised by the Council of Trent (Sess. VI, *Decretum de Iustificatione*, cap. 14), as expressed in the Roman Catechism (also known as the Catechism of the Council of Trent): 'the matter, as it were, of the Sacrament of Penance is the acts of the penitent,—namely, contrition, confession and satisfaction,—as has been declared by the Council of Trent.'[31] The current (1994) *Catechism of the Catholic Church* succinctly states the Roman Catholic understanding of satisfaction: 'Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must 'make satisfaction for' or 'expiate' his sins. This satisfaction is also called 'penance.'[32]

Frederic P. Harton, a twentieth century English theologian, priest, and dean of Bath and Wells, explains repentance using this threefold scheme (rather than the fourfold scheme of the Homily of Repentance) in his authoritative compendium on ascetical theology which, while intended primarily for Anglican readers, draws heavily on Roman Catholic sources.[33] Nevertheless, Harton's understanding of satisfaction is more nearly in line with the Homily's admonitions to confess one's sins to those people whom one has injured and to make reparations to them, rather

[30] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: Tertia Pars (QQ I–XC)*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, ed. Paul A. Böer, Sr. (Dublin: Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2012), 713.

[31] *The Council of Trent: Catechism for Parish Priests*, trans. John A. McHugh, O.P. and Charles J. Callan, O.P. (Baltimore: Lucas Brothers, n.d.), http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/romancat.html.

[32] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), English translation (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), para. 1459.

[33] F.P. Harton, *The Elements of the Spiritual Life: A Study in Ascetical Theology* (1932; repr., London: SPCK, 1957), 158–164. He was criticised by some Anglicans for his heavy dependence on these sources. Apropos later discussion in this essay, Harton largely ignores the pre-Reformation English ascetical tradition.

than with a theology of satisfaction as expiation of the temporal effects of sin, expressed in the authoritative Roman Catholic sources cited.

The Homily, the Continental Reformation, and Humanism

The Homily's rejection of expiatory satisfaction and therefore of the contemporary Roman Catholic understanding of penance is wholly in keeping with the Protestant understanding of justification *sola gratia et sola fide* which is woven throughout the Book(s) of Homilies. Luther's realisation—on the basis of comparison with Erasmus' critical Greek New Testament text—that the Vulgate text of Matthew 4:17 had translated the Greek verb to 'repent' (*metanoien*) as 'do penance' (*poenitentiam agite*) rather than as 'repent' led him eventually to reject the entire medieval structure of penance as a system of works righteousness.[34]

The particular influence of the Reformed tradition is also notable. The first part of the Homily is dependent on a sermon by Rudolph Gwalther, Zwingli's son-in-law and successor as pastor of the Grossmünster and as *antistes* of Zürich, on the same subject.[35] Additionally, the structure of the Homily largely follows Calvin's discussion of penitence in Chapter IV of Book Three of the *Institutes*, and there is a good deal of shared content between that chapter and the Homily. Both cite a number of the same passages of Scripture (including a particular interpretation of Christ's command to the healed leper, 'Go thy way, and shew thyself unto the priest,' Matt. 8:4), both present Nectarius' abolition of private auricular confession in Constantinople as evidence in support of denying the necessity of the practice, and both make provision for private confession to a pastor for the person with a disquieted conscience.[36]

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[34] The Augsburg Confession (in Article XI) declares that the Evangelical (Lutheran) Churches retain private absolution, while (like the later Homily of Repentance) rejecting the *necessity* of enumerating one's sins; i.e., of auricular confession, suggesting that our much-touted 'Anglican' view of private confession is in fact Lutheran! (The influence of Lutheranism on the Articles of Religion and on some Anglican liturgical texts is well attested.)

[35] Cf. Bray, *A Fruitful Exhortation*, 54, note 15; and 'An Homily of Repentance' (Footstool Publications, n.d.), 526, note 1, http://footstoolpublications.com/Homilies/Bk2_Repentance20.pdf. This online text was prepared from Griffith's annotated edition of 1859.

[36] While not ruling out the possibility, I do not suggest that either the structure or the content of the Homily was taken directly from Calvin's *Institutes*, but simply that (unexceptionally) the influence of Calvin's theology may be seen in the Homily.

Thus far continental Protestant influences: but are other influences found in the Homily of Repentance? The influence of the Christian humanism associated with the universities of Oxford and Cambridge on the theological and ecclesiastical outlook of the writers of the Homilies whose authorship can be assigned is a generally accepted fact.[37] Furthermore, in an essay arguing the influence of English humanism on the Homilies, John Wall suggests that the arrangement of the first Book of Homilies follows the *Enchiridion militis Christiani* of the Dutch humanist and priest Desiderius Erasmus, who argued that 'the Christian should begin with the Bible, which contains the knowledge men need to imitate Christ; proceed to self-knowledge gained from studying the Scriptures; move on to faith, the 'onely gate unto Christ'; and culminate in an active life of struggle against evil through charitable acts.'[38]

The Homily and the Pre-Reformation English Pastoral Tradition

Alongside the theological influence of continental Protestantism and of English humanism, I suggest that there are at least hints and echoes detectable in the Homily that suggest the influence of the pre-Reformation English pastoral tradition, though the lack of references to texts in that tradition suggests perhaps indirect or broader 'cultural,' rather than direct, influence.

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[37] These included Cranmer, John Harpsfield, Edmund Bonner, and Thomas Becon in the first Book; and John Jewel, Richard Taverner, and possibly Edmund Grindal, James Pilkington, and Matthew Parker in the second. Jewel, the bishop of Salisbury and general editor of the second Book, is known to have authored the majority of its sermons, including the Homily of Repentance. Cf. Bray, *A Fruitful Exhortation*, 5, 53–54; 'Homilies, the Books of,' in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 785–86.

[38] 'The Book of Homilies of 1547 and the Continuity of English Humanism in the Sixteenth Century,' *AThR* 58, no. 1 (1976): 77. Erasmus, who lived in England from 1499–1500 and again from 1509–1514, studied first at Oxford and later taught at Cambridge, where he became the first lecturer in Greek and possibly succeeded John Fisher as Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity. Erasmus also kept up a lively correspondence with Henry the Eighth and is thought by some scholars to have exercised a significant if indirect influence on the Henrician reformation of the Church of England. Cf. G.W. Bernard, *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). Notably, Christian humanism of the universities was itself a mediator of continental Protestant thought in England.

In his book *English Spirituality*, Martin Thornton identifies six characteristics of the English pastoral tradition that began in the twelfth century (with roots in the Anglo-Saxon Church) and was broadly represented by Anselm of Canterbury, the fourteenth-century ascetical writers (such as Walter Hilton and Julian of Norwich), and the Caroline Divines: 1) a consistency in maintaining the speculative-affective synthesis of theology and devotion; 2) a strong pastoral insistence on the unity of the Church Militant—clergy, laity, and religious; 3) a unique humanism and a unique optimism; 4) the central role of spiritual direction; 5) the foundation of Christian life in the liturgy; and 6) the subservience of formal private prayer to habitual recollection.[39] While further work needs to be done to demonstrate the accuracy of Thornton's assertion that this particular cluster of the characteristics distinguishes the medieval *English* pastoral tradition from the contemporary continental pastoral tradition (or traditions) as well as the later Roman Catholic pastoral tradition, I assume the accuracy of his thesis insofar as it correctly represents the character of the pre-Reformation English pastoral tradition *per se*.

The characteristics identified by Thornton may be noted, to various degrees, in the Homily of Repentance. 1) The soteriology and moral theology of the Reformation are woven throughout the Homily, joining if not the speculative and the affective *per se*, then joining dogmatic theology and pastoral admonition and care in homiletical form. One might object that this is universally the character of robust Christian preaching, but a further linkage of the theological and the devotional-liturgical may be noted in Cranmer's intention for the first Book of Homilies, whose publication preceded that of the Book of Common Prayer by two years: 'to prepare the way for his new Protestant liturgy as well as to be used in conjunction with it.'[40] 2) Repentance is a matter for clergy no less than laity (as the entire Church Catholic would agree), but the English Reformers go further than this by rejecting the contemporary system of sacramental penance, and the Homily provocatively asserts that if the Epistle of James enjoins auricular confession on the Church, then it binds priests to confess to the laity no less than it binds the laity to confess to priests. 3) While the Homily in all its parts strongly proclaims the vileness

[39] Thornton, *English Spirituality*, 48–52. Thornton provides an earlier and less developed list of these characteristics (consisting only of the first three) in *Margery Kempe: An Example in the English Pastoral Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1960), 11–12. I have altered Thornton's ordering of these six characteristics for the clarity of my subsequent discussion.

[40] Ashley Null, 'Salvation and Sanctification in the Book of Homilies,' *RTR* 62, no. 1 (2003): 14.

of sin and the judgment of God on all sinners, there is little in the way of hellfire and brimstone,[41] and the whole of the text moves instead toward the declaration of God's grace and mercy and his desire for sinners to repent and return to him rather than to perish: 'Now, unto all them that will return unfeignedly unto the Lord their God, the favour and mercy of God unto forgiveness of sins is liberally offered.'[42] 4) Spiritual direction, or more precisely spiritual counsel, is emphasised in the Homily's commendation of the pastoral assurance of forgiveness to those troubled in conscience by their sins. 5) Furthermore, the Homily paves the way for the novel treatment of confession as public and corporate in Cranmer's 1548 English Order for Communion, written to be inserted into the Latin Mass after the eucharistic canon, which situated the confession of sin thereafter in the liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer and made the confession of sin a public liturgical act for priest and people together.[43]

Regarding confession as a habitual state of life and relevant to the particular matter of the Homily of Repentance, Thornton identifies three themes that give the penitential theology and praxis of the pre-Reformation English Church a distinctive character, including: 1) the nature of confession as a regular part of normal life; 2) the acknowledged validity of non-sacramental confession; and 3) a lack of distinction between mortal and venial sins. First and most significant for Thornton is the nature of confession as a regular part of normal life, 'a generous profession of sinfulness and self-oblation before the healing Cross.'[44] He refers to this as a 'devotional' approach, in contrast to the 'juridical' approach of pre-Reformation continental and modern Roman Catholic practice. The Homily of Repentance, in its call to regular attention to the reading and hearing of the Scriptures, as well as the call to recognise the transitory and fragile nature of human life, commits the Christian

[41] The 'intolerable and endless torments of hellfire' are noted only once in the Homily, in the concluding sentences of the third and final part.

[42] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 499.

[43] In placing a corporate confession of sin in the public liturgy of the Church, Cranmer was following continental Protestant, specifically Reformed, examples. In 1524 Theobald Schwartz, an assistant priest at the Minster in Strassburg, adapted the *Confiteor* from the local breviary and introduced it into his German Mass as a congregational confession of sins. Prior to the Reformation, in 1502, Johann Surgant, a priest and professor of theology in Basel, had introduced a general confession of sin into his preaching office based on the medieval service of Prone, whence it found its way into Zwingli's 1525 preaching office for the reformed church in Zürich.

[44] Thornton, *English Spirituality*, 152. The pastoral theology of Caroline Divines is an integral part of the English pastoral tradition eludicated by Thornton.

to a habitual state of repentance described by Thornton in relation to the Caroline Divines, who would themselves have been influenced by the Homilies: 'Acts of contrition are important, but only that penitence may become a habitual state.'[45] It may also be observed that in making the corporate confession of sin an unvarying part of the vernacular liturgy of the Church, the Prayer Book firmly situates the devotional nature of repentance in the Church's daily and weekly worship of God and thus makes the practice of corporate confession (and the recollection of sin) a regular part of normal life.

Second, Thornton notes that at least two Celtic authorities allow the validity of non-sacramental confession, quoting the *Penitential* of Theodore which states that 'it shall be lawful that confession be made to God alone.'[46] While the Celtic sources allow this with some apparent hesitation, the teaching that confession is primarily made to God alone, whether secretly or in public worship, is clearly the teaching of both the Homily of Repentance and the Prayer Book. Third, like William of St Thierry, a twelfth-century French abbot and ascetical theologian who influenced the English pastoral tradition, the Homily makes no distinction between mortal and venial sins (indeed, the terms do not occur in the text). But unlike William, who makes a distinction between 'sins of malice' and 'sins of infirmity,' the homilist takes a decidedly rigorist approach, condemning all sins as filthy, vile, and an offense to Almighty God deserving condemnation, an approach that the Caroline Divines, exemplified by Jeremy Taylor, will also follow.[47]

The Homily expresses yet another theme, unmarked by Thornton, found within the English pastoral tradition in the writings of the fourteenth century English priest, mystic, and ascetical theologian, Walter Hilton. Hilton, while defending the practice of auricular confession as a general obligation for all Christians because of its necessity for 'most' Christians, understands priestly absolution to be *declarative* rather than *effective*.[48]

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[45] Thornton, *English Spirituality*, 251.

[46] Thornton, *English Spirituality*, 154.

[47] Thornton, *English Spirituality*, 250–51.

[48] According to the declarative understanding, in pronouncing absolution the priest or bishop is *declaring* forgiveness that God has already given; while according to the effective understanding the priest or bishop is *effecting* forgiveness in a real sense. The declarative understanding is found in the Prayer Book as well, in the absolution that follows the Confession of Sin at Morning and Evening Prayer: 'and hath given power and commandment to his Ministers, *to declare and pronounce* to his people being penitent, the absolution and remission of their sins' (1559, emphases mine).

This was a traditional view associated with Bonaventure, still held in Hilton's day by many theologians, though it had already begun to give way to the effective view of Thomas Aquinas, which was eventually given canonical endorsement by the Council of Trent. As to when forgiveness takes place, Hilton's words in Book II of *The Scale of Perfection* sound as though they could have come from the Homily of Repentance (or from the Exhortation to Communion): 'Although the ground of forgiveness does not stand primarily in [sacramental] confession, but in contrition of the heart and in repentance for sin, nevertheless I suppose there is many a soul that would never have felt true contrition or fully forsaken its sin if there were no confession.'[49] Even allowing for his (not wholly convincing) defense of the general necessity of auricular confession in the text that follows, Hilton provides a splendid example of the pastoral understanding of confession in the English tradition, rather than the juridical understanding found in contemporary continental sources and in post-Tridentine Roman Catholic theology.[50] This pastoral understanding is found the Homily as well, in both the provision for pastoral assurance of the disquieted penitent and the understanding of the causes of forgiveness: 'Yet if we will with a sorrowful and contrite heart make an unfeigned confession of [our sins] unto God, he will freely and frankly forgive them, and so put all our wickedness out of remembrance before the sight of his majesty.'[51]

Reformed and Rooted

Alongside the general influence of English humanism and the particular influence of continental Protestantism, the Homily of Repentance demonstrates characteristics and themes that situate it within the pre-Reformation English pastoral tradition.[52] Thornton has also remarked on

[49] Walter Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, trans. John P.H. Clark and Rosemary Dorward (New York: Paulist, 1991), 202.

[50] Closely related to the idea of priestly effectiveness (see above), in the scholastic understanding of penance the absolution and forgiveness of sins are understood more as a juridical act by the priest and less as a declaration of the Gospel to the penitent.

[51] 'An Homily of Repentance,' 503.

[52] This essay makes the case for this influence on the Homily of Repentance only, though it seems likely that the influence of the pre-Reformation English pastoral tradition extends beyond this homily alone, particularly given that the argument of this essay is for situating the Homilies within that tradition and not for the direct influence of specific texts.

the convergence of some of the characteristics of this tradition and their practical implications, e.g. the implicit need in fourteenth century ascetical practice for a common Office and a vernacular Bible, with the theological and liturgical reforms of the sixteenth century of which the Books of Homilies are an integral part.[53] Admittedly, there is no evidence to suggest that this pastoral tradition's influence on the Homily of Repentance was direct and textual. However, the evidence does suggest that the Homily is rooted in a longstanding and distinctive native pastoral tradition. When the homilist preaches and teaches the reformed doctrine of repentance, he does so with a distinctly English accent.

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[53] Thornton, *English Spirituality*, 51.