

Article

The Irish Penitentials and Conscience Formation

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Abstract: As commonly used in its moral sense I will, for the purposes of this paper, take the concept of “conscience” to be the inherent ability of every healthy human being to perceive what is right and what is wrong and, on the strength of this perception, to control, monitor, evaluate and execute their actions. Such values as right or wrong, good or evil, just or unjust, and fair or unfair have existed throughout human history and are also shaped by an individual’s cultural, political and economic environment. The medieval penitential literature offers just one such historical snapshot. These manuals or guides for confessors, including prayers, lists of questions to be asked by the confessor, and penances to be assigned for various sins were an integral part of the practice of private penance which began in the Celtic Church and later spread through Europe with the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon missions. Penitential books for use by confessors in private penance appeared in the sixth through ninth centuries. These texts were not as a rule decreed by episcopal synods. Their authority generally rested on the reputation of their compiler or editor. Public penances were assigned for public sins that caused scandal for the church. Private penances were assigned for private sins or matters of conscience. The Penitentials were generally more flexible than the churches’ ancient canonical penitential system which they largely replaced. While later European Penitentials tended to provide more complete guidance for the confessor instead of mere lists of rules and penalties; such instruction is not entirely absent from the earlier Irish texts and ancillary documents. Thus, the goal of penance in the early middle ages was not only sacramental but also didactic. It would have been an occasion to inculcate Christian beliefs, an opportunity to model proper Christian behaviour and by extension a key part of the formation of conscience. As was the case with later expressions of casuistry (Etym. Latin casus, case, or problem to be solved) the purpose of the penitential literature was thus to adapt and apply the unchangeable norms of Christian morality to the changing and variable circumstances of human life albeit in somewhat rudimentary fashion. As such this literary genre and the pastoral practices stemming from it are a valid and worthy object of any historical study and theological analysis concerning the ‘formation of conscience.’



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Forming a reliable and mature conscience is generally considered to be a lifelong effort that for the believer includes education in Christian teachings and moral principles. It has long been understood to require the sound use of reason and the fostering of interior virtue through faith and prayer. Whilst the terminology of conscience formation may be somewhat alien to the world of the Irish Penitentials, the necessity of individual and collective moral instruction and decision making is nonetheless clearly evident in these ancient texts.

1. An Introduction to the Penitentials

These rudimentary handbooks of penance, completed largely in the sixth to ninth centuries in Ireland and Celtic Britain, are regarded now by historians and theologians as unique documents that were a response to a particular situation in the Christian Church at a specific time and place. The penitential authors frequently claim that their works are based on the traditions of the Fathers and on sacred scripture. Nevertheless, they do not have any obvious or extant precursors either in the Eastern tradition, which has most direct influence on Celtic Christianity or in the emerging Roman tradition at the time (Tanner 2009, p. 64).

Manuals or guides for confessors, including prayers, lists of questions to be posed by the confessor, and penances to be assigned for various sins were an integral part of the practice of private penance which began in the sixth through ninth centuries in the Celtic Church and later spread through Europe with the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon missions. As a general rule the texts were not decreed by episcopal synods. Their authority generally rested instead upon the reputation of their compiler or editor.

2. Development from Previous Theology and Praxis

By contrast in the Early Christian Church absolution for sin was only granted after a public confession and abasement; reconciliation was followed by readmission to the Eucharist. Absolution was granted once in a lifetime, publicly, and at set seasons of the year. This ancient praxis of penance relied on papal decrees and synods.

The Penitentials were as a rule, much more flexible than the church's ancient canonical penitential system which they largely replaced. While later European Penitentials tended to provide more complete guidance for the confessor instead of lists of rules and penalties; such instruction is by no means absent from the earlier Irish texts and ancillary documents. Thus the goal of penance in the early middle ages was not only sacramental but also didactic. It would have been an occasion to inculcate Christian beliefs, an opportunity to model proper Christian behaviour and by extension a key part of the formation of conscience.

As was the case with later expressions of casuistry (from the Latin *casus*, case, or problem to be solved) the purpose of the penitential literature was thus to adapt and apply the unchangeable norms of Christian morality to the changing and variable circumstances of human life albeit in somewhat rudimentary fashion. As such this literary genre and the pastoral practices stemming from it are a valid and worthy object of historical study and theological analysis which have as their focus 'formation of conscience.'

As commonly used in its moral sense I will, for the purposes of this paper, take the concept of "conscience" to be the inherent ability of every rationally sound human being to perceive what is right and what is wrong and, on the strength of this perception, to control, monitor, evaluate and execute their actions. Such values as right or wrong, good or evil, just or unjust, and fair or unfair have existed throughout human history and are also shaped by an individual's cultural, political and economic environment (See Slater 1990). The medieval penitential literature offers just one such historical snapshot.

Janet Tanner citing Thomas O'Loughlin notes that the system of '*private penance*' in Ireland which gave rise to the Penitentials marked a profound change in theology. Christianity became more of a journey into holiness than a once-and-for all conversion—as O'Loughlin puts it, 'the life-long struggle to grow more like Christ' (O'Loughlin 2000). This perhaps represented a return to the early years when the Church was known as the 'way' and Christians were disciples who were learners on that 'way'. It also marked a rediscovery of the real part that sin and repentance have to play for real, fallible people in the growth into holiness. This contrasted with the disconnection that had developed between what people were actually like—sinners—and what they should have been like in theory after baptism—holy (Tanner 2009, p. 65).

The Penitentials present a new view of (1) a sinful offense's nature, (2) the purpose of doing penance, and, (3) the understanding of religious culpability. In contrast to the notion of a crime solely demanding a punishment—an assumption in Roman law—they adopt a notion of crime that closely resembled the system of debts found in early Irish [or *Brehon*] Law comprising the statutes governing everyday life in early medieval Ireland whereby a crime, such as homicide for instance, incurred a debt for the murderer to the victim's family which had to be repaid. The size of the fine varied with the gravity of the action, the status of the offender and the offended, and the intention of the offender. The point being that those impacted by the consequences of the crime also had to be taken into account.

Thus any sinful act's penitential "weighting" depended on the action (e.g., homicide was worse than theft), the actor (e.g., cleric more culpable than lay), the one offended—if applicable (e.g., stealing from a church was worse than from a private individual), and with

what intention (e.g., by accident or neglect, in hot temper, or cold-bloodedly). Accordingly, just as a crime against another person produced a debt, so too a crime against God produced a liability that could be worked-off (the system inherently allowed for repetition) with suitable religious atonements of prayer, fasting, and alms (cf. Mt 6:2–18).

3. The Therapeutic Dimension

The other key element in the Penitentials' understanding of sinfulness is that penance is not seen entirely as retributive rather it is also therapeutic; sin in turn, is viewed as a symptom of sickness rather than a manifestation of evil. This derives from John Cassian (c. 360–435) whose writings form a key pillar of western monasticism.¹ Indeed, McNeill and Gamer argue that the prevalence of the conception of penance as 'medicine for the soul' in the Penitentials is a development of an extended medical analogy or metaphor which was already apparent in the ancient penance of the Church. They note that it is particularly in the Penitentials that this view is developed with special application of the medical principle advocated by the so called 'methodist' school of physicians, founded by Themison of Laodicea who flourished at Rome circa 50 BC.²

With regard to the purpose of this present paper, they make the following key observation 'the objective held in view with regard to the healing ministry of penance seems to have been in large degree the reconstruction of personality. The confessor was indeed taught to regard himself as a minister of supernatural grace; but no less prominent is the idea of the processes of penance as constituting a treatment in itself effective toward the recovery of the spiritual health that has been lost through sin. Lacking the humanitarianism generally professed and often practiced today, the authors of these handbooks nevertheless had a sympathetic knowledge of human nature and a desire to deliver men and women from the mental obsessions and social maladjustments caused by their misdeeds' (Ibid.).

One cannot help but summon to mind the contemporary terminology of development and education of personal moral conscience when reading the foregoing commentary. As Frantzen puts it; 'The Penitential was not only a list of sins and penalties for them; it was a blueprint for the sinner's conversion, didactic or catechetical as well as disciplinary. Mindful of the need to confess and repent, the medieval Christian no doubt became a more obedient and dutiful member of his society' (Frantzen 1983, pp. 6–7).

4. The Patristic Backdrop

Cassian to whom the penitential authors are clearly indebted, saw sinful acts as expressions of eight underlying vices (called "principal" as they are the *principia* -or sources- from which sins flow). They are described as chronic illnesses deep within the individual, requiring suitable medicine prescribed by a qualified physician. The monastery was therefore the place where sinners received ongoing spiritual 'therapy' according to a dictum observed by medicine in late antiquity, namely: "contraries heal contraries". So just as, for instance, the physical illness of fever needs cold, so the spiritual illness of gluttony requires fasting. Thus in the extant *libelli* even when Cassian is not quoted, medical language is usually applied to the reconciliation process, and the sins arranged systematically under the vices which produce them just like diseases might be classified under certain causal headings.

In this way, although the Penitentials, like their Patristic sources did not have a fixed terminology for the notion of conscience, much less its formation, they nonetheless presented principles in such a manner as to show that they were reflecting theologically and profoundly on the subject of moral consciousness, its development and its importance in human life. Like the Fathers before them the Penitential authors did not expound their doctrine in an academic or conceptual way, but preferred memorable images replete with meaning. The importance of a well-honed sense of right and wrong for the moral life of Christians, and the need for this to be examined and reconciled with the moral norms that govern individual conduct were thus implied if not explicitly stated.

With St. Augustine (354–430) theological reflection on morality in the early Church was to find its most systematic exponent. It is to him after all, that we still owe one of the most influential concepts of sin throughout history: “Peccatum est factum vel dictum vel concupitum contra aeternam legem” (Babcock 1988, pp. 28–55) In time the scholastics were to openly adopt the Augustinian notion of sin, adapting it to their own methodological and conceptual interests. Without detracting from the value of Augustine’s definition of sin as an infraction of the eternal law, we might note however that the way in which it has been adopted and utilised by Christian theology has not always been unproblematic. Specifically, we might instance the temptation to understand sin predominantly in terms of transgression or breaking of a norm or law, thus giving rise to the temptation to fall into an abstract and legalistic understanding of ‘contraries’.

5. The Principle of Contraries

Like Augustine the penitential authors were sometimes also accused of a rigid adherence to moral law rather than to personal religious faith. This however is patently unfair and is to ignore the fact that both Augustine and the penitentialists gave special importance to inner dispositions, such as fidelity of the heart, and personal affection and love and their influence on moral judgement as well as highlighting the many factors which could impair this faculty. In this sense, they are as one in emphasising that what matters most is not the external act, but the inner moral disposition and personal effort to counter sinful impulses by adhering to and inculcating the opposing virtue.

Finnian explains: ‘But by contraries, as we said, let us make haste to cure contraries and to cleanse away the faults from our hearts and introduce virtues in their places. Patience must arise for wrathfulness; kindness, or the love of God and of one’s neighbour, for envy; for detraction, restraint of heart and tongue; for dejection, spiritual joy; for greed, liberality; as the Scripture says: “The anger of man works not the justice of God”, and envy is judged as leprosy by the law. Detraction is anathematized in the Scriptures; “He that detracts his brother shall be cast out of the land of the living. Gloom devours or consumes the soul. Covetousness is “the root of all evil” (Gamer and McNeill 1938).

There is here in the penitential literature a very definite and shared conviction that just as sinful choices are reflected at the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual levels, so too all of these facets should be involved in the curative penitential process. *Conversio* cannot simply therefore remain purely intellectual or abstract. Instead, once embarked upon, it must seek to produce real and far-reaching change.

For all their severity, the Penitentials had the merit of avoiding a rigid legalism or formulaic approach to the praxis of repentance. There is always an insistence on the need to reform interior motivation and intention by directly involving the penitent in the undoing of the consequences of their sin. It is hard to imagine that the penitential authors were seeking to merely cancel sinful effects here without at the same time aiming to afford the penitent a formative experience in moral awareness. Thus they distinguish between ‘doing penance’ (*poenitere*) and ‘making satisfaction’ (*satis facere*) (See Connolly 1995).

The Penitential of Cummean for instance, 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]. At first blush, this is the imposition of a simple penance for purposes of correction and a practical prescription to undo the harm that has been caused. But the prescription of penances were to be enacted in the context of Cummean’s overarching 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’ (Ibid, pp. 126–27).

6. Towards Formation of the Individual Conscience

There is here an unexpected refinement and sense of process and progression in moral growth and awareness which is duly reflected in the prescribed acts of penance. Likewise there are many instances of acts of satisfaction which entail a duty to repay what is owed. To

be sure these are often characterised by a juridical tone which, at its worst, tended to reduce the whole scenario to the logic of commerce and the 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 and of what we might today describe as fomenting an awakening and development of individual moral conscience.

Indeed, it might reasonably be argued that it was this theological turn toward the person and more particularly the stirring and fomenting of personal conscience, at play in the monastically moulded Celtic penitential praxis, which was key in addressing the deficiencies of the older canonical Mediterranean model which had held previously sway in Europe.³

From the 6th century onwards that Mediterranean penitential system was to decline into a series of contradictions that would gradually lead to its disappearance. The faithful gradually deserted it because they found it too rigorous and impersonal. They demanded discretion and secrecy instead of publicity, which they considered onerous and unbearable. But at the same time they protested against the fact that penance was a one-off. They clearly felt that it should be repeatable.

For their part, the bishops of the day were in a pastoral quandary: they had to remind people of the obligation to do penance, but were reluctant to make it available to people who were too young. The result was that much of the Christian community lived in a "sacramental vacuum": as penance largely became the sacrament of the elderly and the dying. But with the evolution of society and the emergence of a more refined sense of sin came a desire for personal reconciliation.

The solution was to come from monastic penance. At a time when the episcopal structure was in decline monks were becoming more and more involved in pastoral work. Moreover, some monasteries, with abbots (who were sometimes bishops), managed the pastoral care of real dioceses. The great European figure here undoubtedly is that of Saint Columbanus who along with his disciples, began to spread Irish penitential praxis throughout the continent. These monks practised public displays of repentance on the one hand, but also 'secret confession' and spiritual disclosure to a trusted senior on the other. In the monasteries one confessed one's sins to a spiritual father who was not necessarily a priest. This confession was both secret and repeatable. Because of the unique configuration of Irish society around the monastery the monks also offered confession to the faithful, who formed an integral part of monastic settlements.⁴

7. The Societal Dimension

Accordingly the Irish penitential compilers attempted to embrace the whole society in their drafting of regulations. These, as various canons clearly demonstrate, included the laity as a whole. It is thus fair to say that, the Irish penitential compilers did at least envisage a pastoral care that was accessible to all; even if this proved quite elusive in practice. They pictured a society in which penance was a regular and widespread practice. That said, there were undoubtedly significant limitations to the access and practice of confession and penance for the majority of the converted population. With their vision the monastic leaders also brought a new categorisation of wrongs according to the seven deadly sins: pride, greed, envy, intemperance (or gluttony), lust, anger and sloth.

Two points are worthy of note here: firstly, "capital" did not mean "particularly serious", but simply referenced a chapter heading of a particular list of sins. There are thus seven "chapters" into which the whole kaleidoscope of sins is distributed. Secondly, this list was to be systematically utilised by the Confessor for the penitent's examination of conscience. So penance was no longer to be considered merely a question of external sin; it now had to equally concern itself with thoughts, motivations and intentions. Thus sins were to be distinguished between 'internal and external'. In this manner, these lists and categories point to the beginnings of a refinement in pastoral appreciation of individual

consciousness and moral awareness and their systematic application to the moral life (Frantzen 1983).

Although the Penitentials have traditionally suffered from something of a bad press, on account of *inter alia* the severity of penances imposed, it might be observed in their favour that they were part of a total pastoral system in which personal prayer, the psalms, the Eucharist and various elements of the Christian life were made available both within the monasteries and to lay people dwelling around them. Considering that the monastery was a focal point of life in Ireland, where there were no great cities as in the Roman world, it tended to serve both a secular and religious purpose.

This community, centered upon the monastery, aimed at least in theory and intent, at being a forgiving, reconciling and atoning centre of life. Finnian for instance prescribes that all who have repented, atoned and carried out the requisite penance should be “received back into communion” (Finnian. 34–35; Gamer and McNeill 1938). It is interesting to note that responsibility is placed squarely here upon the community. There is an emphasis upon corporate accountability. There is too a real sense that the founding fathers of Irish monasticism had a vision of a church which could not content itself with being a mere dispensary of penance and of absolution to individuals. Instead, it had to be committed to inculcation of moral awareness and as a result, recourse to the *praxis* of conversion and atonement. In this respect everyone was called to do penance and to convert others. One might venture that there was here an initiative toward the collective formation of moral conscience.

Of course, the example *par excellence* of this way of life was intended to be provided by the monks themselves, who, unlike their desert forefathers did not completely abandon the world but merely remained a little apart, so that they might provide a witness of ascetic life. In this type of community, the differences and divisions of ecclesiastical rank were muted, even the bishop was, in a sense, merely one of the monks, consecrated for the sacramental moments which required episcopal office but otherwise remaining firmly under the jurisdiction of the abbot.

This close association of the monks with the society to which they gave spiritual counsel and guidance was also a key hallmark of their pastoral approach. In this ascetic and intensely spiritual context, ecclesiastical rank and clerical status came very much in second place to the individual’s personal faith response to the Gospel and their call to conversion. Personal witness was therefore a key element of education in the moral life and indeed of what we might call today the ‘awakening and formation of conscience’ though clearly this terminology was completely alien to the penitential authors themselves.

Throughout the penitential literature there is a marked closeness between priest and people, cleric and lay, single and married insofar as they are all united in doing penance together. It is not as though one is the “possessor” of spiritual power and the other is being somehow asked to “measure up”. The principal divisions of the penitential literature are in fact not those of status, rank, age or gender; they are, rather, the divisions of the various kinds of sinful human behaviour and the corresponding virtues which as we have already noted was derived from John Cassian and by extension Evagrius of Ponticus (Connolly 1995; c.f., Sinkewicz 2003).

8. The Monastery as ‘Locus’ of Conscience Formation

What this system lacked perhaps in a formal theoretical reflection upon the question of moral conscience it certainly compensated for in its effort to promote a practical schooling in the discernment of right and wrong. The Irish monastery was in effect a locus for a remarkable union. Newly evangelized people joined in the activity of ascetic penance alongside monks of long standing. Monks rubbed shoulders with the married, bishops with laymen, and saints with sinners. People repenting of distractions at prayer did penance beside those guilty of sexual offences.

What was happening here was a corporate effort to embody a living sign of repentance and atonement. The monastery and by extension the Church, were opened up to the people.

The Irish monastic community had managed to bridge the gap between the official Church and the masses in a way that older churches of Europe had been unable to do among 'civilized' people. Not only was penance re-interpreted but so too were the inter-relation of Church [monastery] and society as well as the communication of spiritual and moral values and their discernment by the preponderance of the lay faithful.

A case may reasonably be made therefore that in the early Irish Church unifying and reconciliatory activity was not simply confined to the explicit practice of penance but was in fact more typically representative of its whole spiritual, Eucharistic and penitential ethos and that this in turn had a significant didactic and pedagogical dimension. A more global change of discipline would of course, take some three centuries and would take place in various stages. At first, the monks confessed without giving absolution; some of them not being priests. Using penitential manuals that indicated the tariffs for the principal sins, they prescribed a penance that was to be completed over a period of time, but could be done in private, at the end of which the penitent could return to the altar, presumably with an enhanced personal sense of right and wrong.

9. A Turn to the Person

Faced with the success of private penance, church authorities in the Carolingian era initially reacted conservatively by attempting to re-establish public penance. At the same time however they ratified the birth of private penance by laying down the principle: "For public sin, public penance; for 'secret sin, 'secret' penance". It was 'secret' penance that finally won the day. Because the evolution of society meant that sin was being viewed more and more as a personal matter as was the discernment of right and wrong.⁵

Frantzen sees this 'turn to the personal dimension' as an early instance of direct tutelage of the individual conscience: 'The benefits of private penance to missionary and pastoral activity are obvious. Private penance now offered the church an opportunity to present its teaching to individuals as well as groups and to approach the faithful through the agency of someone known to them, perhaps raised among them and hence able to understand them and be understood by them.' (Frantzen 1983, p. 7).

Pierre J Payer in turn suggests that the formation of the medieval confessor would have prepared him for the task of hearing confessions and mentoring the moral compass of the penitent. He was thus fully cognisant of the different kinds of sin, of aggravating and mitigating circumstances and of the suggested penances (Payer 1984). There was therefore a very practical and quite thorough engagement between priest and penitent which inevitably led to a refinement and gradual sophistication of the latter's moral awareness.

As Walsh and Bradley point out 'the Penitentials were primarily pastoral in approach; they dealt with the procedure by which sinners were reconciled to God and the community and they informed, directed and exhorted the priest in his confessional responsibilities' (Walsh and Bradley 1991). This in turn had a formative role on the individual's moral development and a knock on benefit for society as a whole: 'Being medicine for souls the Penitentials doubtless had a wholesome influence on daily life. They must have curbed bloody quarrels and feuding. They must have restricted sexual perversion and the use of abortifacients and aphrodisiacs and imposed a certain minimum of hygiene. They must also have been a support to the secular law (Ibid., p. 121).

10. The Influence of Brehon Law

It is likewise worthy of note that the elaboration of these *Libris Pœnitentiales* was evidently not intended as an absolute rupture with the past, but as an innovation attuned to the inadequacies and insufficiencies of the Latin penitential system, effectively correcting it with an operative but, at the same time, none too revolutionary method. At the origin of their adoption of a new penitential order, lay the Irish monks' desire to adapt to a fresh theological and pastoral framework the local indigenous legal system, which benefitted from a surprisingly significant degree of sophistication and was already familiar to the local populace.

Indeed, we can observe a definite adhesion of the Penitentials to the contemporary Celtic juridical customs, while simultaneously avoiding a sharp contrast with the existing ecclesiastical legislation. In this way, the ancient Irish *Brehon* law clearly played a very important part, constituting, in many cases, a sort of necessary regulatory platform. The recourse to this indigenous corpus juris thus allowed the Irish monks to incorporate from a readymade source, juridical schemes and principles that could adapt to their own normative needs for the reform of the institution of penance. *Brehon* law thereby provided a legislative basis for reform (See Costello 1913, pp. 415–40).

All of this being said, the penitential canons, went far beyond the aims of penal law tout-court. In addition to advocating correspondence between legislative prescriptions and the collective and widespread idea of wrongdoings, misdemeanours and offenses; penitential law also had to transcend an exclusively social evaluation of crime and punishment, precisely in virtue of its salvific dimension. Whereas criminal law was intended to protect what is socially relevant to the community to which it belongs; penitential law, as seen by its earliest proponents was the very sanctioning heart of ecclesiastical law, aimed at protecting the natural and supernatural goods of the individual (life, body and soul) which had to be defended from all attacks emanating from the Evil One.

The adaptation of the penal apparatus of the *Brehon* law was thus instrumental in developing a rudimentary Celtic theology of penance. The Irish monks, forced to resort to local Celtic law, borrowed its logical schemes, to allow the salvific system of the Penitential Books to become more efficient while at the same time acknowledging its rootedness in the social conception of ‘offense’. This availing of existing *Brehon* law in the Books for confessors was aimed at creating what today might be described as a ‘common penitential conscience or moral compass’, in such a way that not only could one identify what the social community considered illicit, but also understand the behavioural modalities to be followed for the salvation of the soul.⁶

In this way a juridical technique was applied to a phenomenon which although not juridical in itself, lent itself to being so, for the convenience of collective understanding. This in turn explains the significant number of explicit references, in certain canons of the Celtic *Libri Pœnitentiales* to juridical formulas and institutions that belonged to the ancient indigenous corpus iuris.

11. The Monastic Manifestation of Conscience

A further specific and important forum for the education of the moral conscience was the practice known as manifestation of conscience. ‘Manifestatio conscientiae’ was the revelation of intimate and personal matters made to another usually a senior monk in order that the junior party might be guided more efficaciously by his director in the spiritual life. Intimate and personal matters alluded to would include such phenomena as good intentions, secret acts of virtue, special lights and graces, and also sins, faults, imperfections, weaknesses, propensities to evil, as well as particular dislikes and attractions.

References to ‘extra sacramental’ revelation of intimate matters are found as early as 300 AD in the Rules and Precepts of St. Anthony the Great of Egypt, and in the writings of St. Basil the Great, St. Jerome, and John Cassian, all of whom wrote in the late 4th or early 5th centuries, with the latter having a particularly marked influence on early Irish monasticism.⁷ St. Benedict, the patriarch of western monasticism, makes several references to the manifestation of conscience in his Rule. He incorporates the manifestation of conscience into his monastic legislation as an implicit instrument of spiritual advancement. The significance of his testimony is primarily an extension of the area embraced by the manifestation to include not only imperfections and propensities to evil, but also all tendencies and aspirations to a more perfect observance (Dee 2013).

12. The Role of the Soul Friend

In the early Celtic monasteries the *anamchara* or soul friend, was expected to be someone who dedicated a serious amount of time to their own spiritual practice before

undertaking the guidance of others. There was also a great emphasis placed on the onus on both parties to discern wisely if they were a good fit. An anamchara made a point not to take anyone who was already under someone else's guidance or who they thought would not follow their directions. It was understood that in this special and sacred friendship the two people became, in a certain sense, one in spirit. The anamchara would go so far as to take upon themselves the eternal rewards and consequences of those whom they directed. This would sometimes even mean that a spiritual director would fast and do penance on behalf of the person they were directing if the latter failed to complete the practices prescribed to them (Rodden 2022).

The moral growth being aimed at here was precisely a keener awareness of the multiple areas of human sinfulness and how these were at odds with the call to holiness. Given of course that the practice was not confined to monks in the Irish context, but at least to some extent available also to lay people too, there was here in effect a system for the training and refinement of the moral compass.

In the Teaching of Maelruain, an 8th century Irish monastic rule, this idea of a shared eternal fate between soul friends makes for a great deal of caution in spiritual directors. They were not eager to take on new people because that brought with it great risk and great responsibility. A soul friendship was a sacred thing and was not to be taken lightly by either party. The author of the text observes in regard to Maelruain: "He used to say that the office of spiritual director was perilous because, should the director impose on a penitent a penance commensurate with the gravity of the sin, it was more likely to be breached than observed. But if the director did not impose a penance, the debts of the sinner would fall on himself. 'There are those,' he said, 'who regard confession as penance enough.' It is safer for the director to send them advice, but not receive their confession".⁸

Of course nowadays these ancient texts can often sound somewhat crude because they use language very differently than we do. Nonetheless, the idea of penance as understood and expounded upon by them bears more than a passing resemblance to the modern practice of spiritual direction. Penance was first and foremost an embodied exercise designed to heal the spiritual illness that caused the wrongdoing rather than simply a punishment for wickedness. Even while utilizing such extreme asceticism as was often practiced by the early anamchara, the guiding motif was rarely one of mere punishment and sanction it was rather about proposing a robust but effective remedy for a particular spiritual illness. A little later in the aforementioned text Maelruain is recorded as saying: "We regard the first year spent under spiritual direction as a year of purification, and so you will have to spend three periods of forty days on bread and water, except for a mouthful of milk on Sundays, and during the summer Lent a mixture of whey and water. When you place yourself under the guidance and control of someone else you should seek out the fire which will most fiercely burn, that is, which will spare you the least." (Idem).

13. Awakening Inner Awareness

Maelruain suggests that his followers find an anamchara who will light a fire within them. They should not look for ease and comfort in a spiritual director but rather someone who will challenge them to learn how to grow and develop. Columbanus in turn reminded his monks that even though they are created in God's image, there are often many other images that seek to supplant this. A good anamchara therefore should shine a light upon these false images so that they can be recognised for what they are: namely an illusion preventing one's inner senses from seeing spiritual reality. As Pelagius observed, 'there is a fog within us which keeps us from seeing divine truths. A fire lit within the heart will serve to illuminate the darkness and drive away the fog' (Pohle [1911] 2022). Consequently the anamchara must strive to reignite the flame of faith within the directee in whom the initial spark had been enkindled at baptism and strengthened by the light of Christ.

This passing of the 'torch' of inner awareness is therefore an essential part of the Celtic tradition. There is a 9th century Irish rule which is normally attributed to St Carthage [Modern scholars believe that it is actually written by Fothad na Canóine, who was a

controversial teacher in the Céili Dé reform movement] which includes a section setting out the qualities and duties of an anamchara. In typical Culdee style, the requirements are harsh and strict by modern standards. A true anamchara, says the author, should do two hundred genuflections and recite all of the psalms every single day as part of his ministry (IER 1910).

For Carthage however what is essential in choosing a spiritual director is choosing a guide who practices what they preach; namely one who has a regular spiritual practice and who dedicates their time to prayer and study. his Rule goes on to give this advice to one who aspires to take on the role of anamchara, “If you are a spiritual director to a man, do not barter his soul; be not as the blind leading the blind; do not leave him in neglect”.

Although the abba or amma tradition in the early church was often depicted as a solitary undertaking, early monastic sources make it clear that the gifts of discernment and expertise in offering spiritual counsel are rooted in the experience of obedience in community, or at least in a relationship characterized by obedience to a spiritual elder. A close reading of the Life of Anthony, for example, reveals that his growth in virtue and prayer began with a productive apprenticeship to a geron, a spiritual elder, and that Anthony, the archetypal hermit, made initial progress through careful attention to the examples of virtue he found in his local parish community. Evagrius in turn, learned the art of discernment through the teaching and example of Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, Melania the Elder, Rufinus, and the two Macarii of Nitria and Scetis. Cassian—a key influence for the Penitentialists—was himself instructed by the abbots he names in his Conferences, as well as through friendship with his monastic companion Rufinus. He particularly emphasizes in the first of his Conferences that true discretion presupposes a willingness to open one’s heart to another (Bondi 1986).

Peter Brown comments upon the importance in early monasticism of openness to a spiritual guide as follows: ‘the inner movements of the heart] were best conveyed orally to a spiritual father. It was a situation which tended to give priority to the languages closest to the heart, that is, the vernaculars of Egypt and the Near East—Coptic, Syriac, and demotic Greek. The deepest relief of the soul came now, not from the written page, but from that tap of the Old Man’s fingers on his disciple’s chest, which assuaged the heart beneath. It amounted to nothing less than the discovery of a new alphabet of the heart’ (Brown 1988, p. 16).

14. The Dialogical Dimension of Conscience Formation

It is this same ‘alphabet of the heart’ which eventually finds its way into the Irish penitential tradition and practice. Among the Fathers, John Cassian particularly emphasizes this “dialogical” aspect to exegesis of the human heart. In Conference Two he portrays Abba Moses as asserting: ‘True discretion can only be secured by true humility. And the first proof of this humility consists of reserving everything (not only what one does but also what one thinks), for the scrutiny of the elders: so that one does not trust in one’s own judgment at all, but rather acquiesces in their decisions in every particular; and thus judge what is to be considered good or bad according to their traditions’. (Conference 2.10.1, Cassian 1894).

Cassian’s conferences here provide insight into the tradition of an ‘Abba’ offering extended responses to disciples’ spiritual questions and concerns as their consciences developed and unfolded. Of course his texts are not verbatim records of such conferences. Writing in Gaul around the year 420 Cassian offers in the Institutes his recollections of what he had experienced twenty years previously during what was already coming to be wistfully regarded as the “golden age” of Egyptian monasticism. Nonetheless, his record is useful and instructive in piecing together the foundations of Celtic Monasticism’s later foray into training the moral awareness of individual penitents.

John Cassian’s conferences were undoubtedly adapted to the needs of his intended audience: that is, his own community in Lérins, an influential scholarly monastic settlement off the coast of southern Gaul. Still clearer examples of immediate responses to the

needs of disciples and directees are to be found in Evagrius' Letters. These emphasize the inter-relationship between multiple ascetical projects, thus illustrating very clearly the inter-relationship between spiritual direction and that "spiritual exercise" which consists of contemplative exegesis of the biblical text and examination of the human heart (Dysinger 2009, pp. 423–42). The hugely significant influence upon Celtic monasticism of the tradition of 'manifestation of conscience' as described by Cassian and Evagrius was in turn formative in the reshaping of the praxis of penance within the Celtic monastic Church and which would thereafter be offered to both lay and cleric alike.

Ultimately, this 'turn to the person' as Poschmann, the well-known historian of the sacrament of penance observed, was crucial in the new penitential practice that emerged from a very particular social, geographical and ecclesial context. And whilst this development has been extensively explored and documented insofar as it impacted and influenced the history of penance in the western Church, consideration of its contribution to the development of conscience has thus far been less prominent (Poschmann 1964, p. 120f).

Given the success though of the Celtic penitential model in challenging and ultimately supplanting the older Mediterranean model we can reasonably surmise that as the practice of habitual and reiterable confession became more widespread so too did attention to the development of individual moral consciences through the efforts of those who sought to instruct the faithful in the appropriate manner of preparing adequately for this important spiritual encounter.

15. Conclusions

In sum, the penitential books and the historical moment that they represent mark a very significant era of progress and advancement in the practical expansion of individual moral and spiritual awareness among the faithful of the Western Church. Clearly the contribution of these tomes is hands-on and concrete rather than theoretical or speculative. One will seek in vain in these practical handbooks a systematic exposé or developed theological vocabulary examining the nature and essence of what today we call moral conscience.

Nevertheless, returning to the definition of the formation of conscience referenced at the outset; namely that lifelong effort of education in Christian teachings and moral principles advocating the sound use of reason and the fostering of interior virtue through faith and prayer, we can observe that the influence of these penitential manuals and the outworking of their guidance in pastoral practice is anything but negligible in charting the practical unfolding of this key area of moral endeavour.

Ultimately, tracing the development of the notion and practical experience of moral conscience across centuries of church history 'launches the scholar upon an extensive and fascinating journey through thoroughly absorbing eras of theological and pastoral reflection. The golden age of Irish monasticism and its particular contribution to the praxis of penance and penitence in the universal church is one such era and as such represents a key milestone in the history of moulding our capacity for 'moral decision making in uncertain times'.

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Notes

¹ For a masterly overview see (Beach and Cochelin 2020).

² (Gamer and McNeill 1938). However the 'healing' dimension is by no means unique to the Irish Penitentials it is there accentuation of this aspect that is interesting; see (Kursawa 2017). 'The comparison of the practice of repentance, meaning receiving confession of sins and imposition of penance, with a doctor's therapy for the body is a widely used metaphor for the vocation and duty for the official church ministers as well as for the church's community in general. Especially in the Oriental Church, the exceptional model for the "physicians of soul" is Jesus himself. In the Oriental Church in particular, the Χριστός-Ἰατρός-motif evolves itself into a consistent principle in the third and fourth century and governs as a metaphoric basic attitude'

- ³ For a good discussion and analysis of the similarities and contrasts between the Canonical and Celtic models of Penance see: (Orsy 1989). However Rob Meens argues that these contrasts are somewhat overdone and a diversity of models was always to be found in the western church. See (Meens 2014).
- ⁴ See (Mitchell 1951). Also very insightful here is the work of Rob Meens, for instance, for instance, Meens Rob, *Columbanus and the Practice of Penance in Early Medieval Europe*, Podcast, History Hub on SoundCloud. His masterly opus has rapidly become the standard guide to this era.
- ⁵ Though somewhat dated the work of Mortimer remains of interest here in charting the development of ‘private penance’. See (Mortimer 1939).
- ⁶ Thomas P. Oakley was one of the first to trace the connections between Brehon Law and the Penitential Literature. For instance: (Oakley 1933, pp. 489–500).
- ⁷ See; ‘Manifestation of Conscience’ New Catholic Encyclopedia. *Encyclopedia.com*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/manifestation-conscience> (accessed on 25 August 2022).
- ⁸ The teaching of Mael-Ruain (Gwynn 1927).

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