Teaching Confession in Thirteenth-Century England: Priests and Laity

Andrew Reeves

9.1 Introduction

By the middle of the 12th century, the thinkers of the cathedral schools and nascent universities of Western Christendom had given the Church’s theory and practice on confession the shape that it would in many ways keep down to the present day.1 This “scholastic turn” in the treatment of confession occurred in the fields of both theology and canon law, both of which disciplines were dedicated to helping clergy understand how to carry out the Church’s mission to ensure that everyone achieved salvation.2 From the middle of the 12th century, the canonists of the Church largely followed Gratian, whose Decretum served as the textbook for the study of canon law from the 12th century through the end of the Middle Ages.3 In his discussion of confession, Gratian places authorities both for and against the requirement that the penitent confess his

---


3 On the origins of the Decretum, see Anders Winroth, The Making of Gratian’s Decretum (Cambridge: 2000), and, more generally, James Brundage, Medieval Canon Law (New York: 1995), 37–49. Although the Decretum was never authoritative in the same way that the Church’s councils, synods, and papal rulings were, Gratian’s collection helped shape the thought of school-trained clergy through the end of the Middle Ages and beyond.
sins to a priest before coming to the conclusion that the penitent should confess to a priest when possible.4

Peter Lombard’s Sentences served the same purposes for theology as Gratian’s did for canon law: it served as the theology textbook of the universities and cathedral schools from the later 12th century to the end of the Middle Ages.5

Lombard’s distinction between mortal and venial sins is part of his larger treatment of the fall of Adam and Eve, which itself is part of his overall treatment of sin and evil in the world.6 A mortal sin, he concludes, is when a Christian has a desire to commit a sin and then follows through on such a desire through one’s own choice. Such a sin results in damnation even for a baptized Christian.7 The Christian could return to a state of grace, grasp the second plank after the shipwreck – this commonplace was already centuries old by Lombard’s time – through a process of contrition, a deep sorrow for having offended God, confession of one’s sin, and satisfaction for the offense: penance in deed to make up for the temporal debt remaining even after the restoration of the state of grace. Like Gratian, Lombard argues for the general necessity of confession to a priest, but also leaves open the possibility of the efficacy of confession to God alone or a layperson when a priest is unavailable.8

Neither Gratian’s nor Lombard’s teachings were new, but were rather the systematization of the canonical and theological writings of the preceding five centuries. This systematization of the Church’s thinking on confession would lead to a greater emphasis on regular confession by the Church’s laity, much of which we can already see in action by the 12th century.9 This already potent

7 2 Sent. 42 c. 3.2.
8 See Silano’s introduction to The Sentences. Book 4, xii–xxxvii for a discussion of Lombard’s thinking in dialogue with canonists and theologians of the 12th century.