“THE HARD BED OF THE CROSS”: GOOD FRIDAY PREACHING AND THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

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Abstract: The use of the seven deadly sins in late-medieval Good Friday sermons reflects a changing conception of sin from external act to internal disposition. In many sermons, the seven deadly sins are used largely rhetorically, rather than doctrinally: where theological points are made, they are made idiosyncratically; there is no fixed formulation to which preachers resorted, nor are the sins integral to the sermons. As redemption of sin is the focus of Good Friday, this idiosyncrasy suggests a diminished interest in the seven deadly sins as a matter of theology while preachers continued to rely on them as rhetorical conveniences. The larger goal in the invocation of these sins is affective, an attempt to make personal and immediate Christ’s suffering and death. Preachers were less interested in enumerating forbidden behaviors than in encouraging a more positive rejection of sin born out of a close identification with Christ in his suffering.

I. Introduction

That each sin crucifies Christ anew was a medieval commonplace, central to the meaning of Good Friday. During the Good Friday liturgy, Christ’s Passion and death were not just liturgically reenacted, but were believed to be recurring: Christ was again, each Good Friday, redeeming the sins of the world, bearing them on the cross, including those sins of the contemporary congregation. This commonplace was made vivid by rituals such as the Veneration of the Cross, during which the congregation approached the cross on its knees while it heard the chanting of the Improperia, a series of reproaches placed in Christ’s mouth that contrast what Christ had done for the Jews in the Old Testament with the treatment they inflicted on him during the Passion. The liturgical placement of the Improperia made the contemporary audience complicit in inflicting this suffering on Christ; a contemporary sinner was thus no different from the first-century Jews. To make the audience feel its complicity—that their sins continue to crucify Christ—and thus respond to Christ’s suffering as an ongoing event, preachers of
late-medieval Good Friday sermons found ways to connect as closely as possible the events reenacted on Good Friday with the daily sins of their audience. In Good Friday sermons Christ’s Passion is presented as the consequence of sin, an antidote to sin, and the antithesis of sin; the emphasis in most sermons, however, is not on sin itself, but on an experience of and the appropriate response to the Passion—not on what not to do, but on how to feel.

The seven deadly sins, a convenient and popular way to categorize sin, offered preachers one tradition on which they could rely to make Christ’s suffering immediately present to their congregation. The most common appearance the sins make in late-medieval Good Friday sermons is in a series of juxtapositions in which each deadly sin is paired with one of Christ’s torments. Such juxtapositions in Good Friday sermons function both mnemonically to underscore the relationship between the Passion and sin and rhetorically to solicit feelings of guilt, gratitude, and compassion. They thus helped to forge the connection between Christ’s Passion and the contemporary sinner. Because this is a seemingly simple set of juxtapositions, the combination of sins and torments was recognizable as a set to medieval audiences, and part of the response preachers could anticipate comes by way of this recognition. The juxtapositions thus constitute a topos of Good Friday preaching, but, as with other medieval topoi, this does not suggest that they were the result of a preacher’s lack of ingenuity when composing sermons. Not only are there many variations of this topos, but within a single example there are variations in the ways sins are paired with torments. The pairings arise from a variety of ways of conceiving both the seven deadly sins and Christ’s redemptive suffering and death. Preachers could assume audiences knew the basic shape of this topos, but they manipulated the details to achieve their own ends. The topos thus reveals what these ends may have been, and because it results from an amalgamation of traditions, both aesthetic and doctrinal, it reveals the way the medieval imagination reworks and recombines material to create new sets of associations and images. By connecting the sins to

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1 The juxtaposition also appears, for instance, in *Le Manuel des Péchés*, the thirteenth-century Old French treatise on the vices and virtues, which includes a variation of this topos when it discusses Christ’s Passion in a section on the articles of the Creed. *Roberd of Brunne’s Handlyng Synne (Written A.D. 1303); with the French treatise on which it is founded, Le Manuel des Pechiez by William of Wadington . . .*, ed. F. J. Furnivall (London, 1862), 418.