Penitential

Gildas the Wise (c. AD 500–570)

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English translation

GILDAS ON PENANCE.

The present text is that found in Wasserschleben's "Bussordnungen" 1851. It has been reprinted in Haddan and Stubbs, "Councils, etc." i, 113. Beginning of Gildas' preface respecting penance. (A.) 1. A presbyter or deacon committing natural or sodomite fornication, if he have taken a monk's vow previously, shall do penance for three years, shall pray for forgiveness every hour, shall do superpositio every week with the exception of the fifty days after Passio, shall have bread without measure and food fattened slightly with butter on the Lord's day; but on other days, if he be a workman, a measure of biscuit and broth slightly thickened, cabbages, a few eggs and British cheese, a Roman half-pint of milk because of weakness of flesh at that time; but a Roman pint of whey or butter-milk to quench his thirst, and the same quantity of water. He is not to have his bed furnished with much straw; let him make some addition by three quadragesimae, as far as his strength will admit. Let him from his deepest heart weep for his fault; let him above all things follow after obedience; after one year and a half he may take the Eucharist and come to communion; let him sing the Psalms with his brethren, lest his soul be lost completely, by so long a time of the heavenly discipline.

2. If a monk placed in a lower grade commit the same sin, he is to do penance for three years, but let the measure of his bread be heavier. If a workman, let him take a Roman pint of milk and another of whey, and as much water as suffices to quench his thirst. 3. But if a presbyter or deacon, without a monk's vow, sin, let his penance be similar to that of a monk without orders. 4. If a monk intend to commit a sin, his penance shall be for one year and a half. The Abbot, however, has authority to moderate in this matter, if the monk's obedience be pleasing to God and to his Abbot. 5. The ancient fathers have fixed twelve years of penance for a presbyter, seven for a deacon. 6. A monk that has stolen a garment or any article shall do penance for two years in the way described above, if he be a junior; if a senior for one whole year. If he is not a monk, let him do the same for one year and, at most, three quadragesimae.

7. If a monk owing to a disordered stomach shall vomit the sacrifice during the day, he is not to take his dinner, and if it be not on account of weakness, he shall atone for his offence by seven superpositiones; if through weakness and not gluttony, by four. 8. If he has not

vomited the sacrifice, let him be punished by superpositio of a day and frequent rebuke. 9. If any one in negligence lose any of the sacrifice, he shall do penance for three quadragesimae, leaving it to be consumed by wild beasts and birds. 10. If any one because of drunkenness is unable to sing the Psalms, being stupefied and without speech, he is deprived of dinner. 11. A man that sins with an animal will do penance for one year: if by himself alone, let him atone for his offence by three quadragesimae. 12. He that shall hold communion with a man excommunicated by his Abbot shall do penance forty days.

13. A man eating carrion unknowingly (shall do penance), forty days. 14. It must, however, be known that as long as a man delays in sins, penance must be proportionately increased to him. (B.) 15. If a certain work is imposed upon any man, and he, in contempt, omits to do that work, let him go without his dinner; if from real forgetfulness, he will have half his daily share of food. 16. But if he undertake the work of another, let him make that known to the Abbot with modesty, in the hearing of no one except the Abbot, and let him perform it if commanded. 17. For he who retains anger in his heart a long time, is in death. But if he confess his sin, let him fast forty days, and if he persist further in his sin, two quadragesimae, and if he commit the same sin, let him be cut off from the body as a decayed member, because anger nourishes homicide.

18. If a man is offended by anyone, he ought to make this known to the Abbot, not with the feeling of an accuser, but of one desiring to heal, and let the Abbot decide. 19. Who does not meet at the finishing [of the second Psalm], let him sing eight Psalms in order; if, when roused, he comes in after the reading is finished, let him repeat whatever the brethren have sung, in due order. But if he come to the second reading, let him go without his dinner. 20. If any one by mistake change anything of the sacred words where ”danger” is marked, let him observe a three days’ fast or three superpositiones. 21. If through neglect the consecrated element fall to the ground, let him go without dinner. 22. He that has of his own will defiled himself in his sleep, if the monastery have plenty of beer and meat, shall keep vigil for three hours of the night standing, provided he is really a man of strength. If, however, the food be poor, let him, standing as a suppliant, recite twenty-eight or thirty Psalms, or make recompense by extraordinary work.

23. For good kings we ought to make the sacred offering, for the bad not. 24. Presbyters are not prohibited from offering for their bishops. 25. He that is proved guilty of any offence and is checked as one inconsiderate, let him go without dinner. 26. He that breaks a hoe that had previously no fracture, should make restitution for it by extraordinary work, or should . observe a superpositio. 27. Whoever shall see one of the brethren breaking the commands of the Abbot, ought not to hide it from the Abbot; but let him previously admonish the sinner to confess, himself, to the Abbot his evil deed; let him be found not so much an informer, as a man who carries out the rule of truth. So far Gildas. [Selected footnotes numbered and placed at the end]

Introduction

APPENDIX B.
THE PENITENTIAL OF GILDAS. DE POENITENTIA.

IT may be well here to remind the reader of a few points that are treated of at greater length in the Introduction. The Church, for purposes of discipline, had developed various modes of correction in the case of lapses into sin, as well as of reconciliation by absolution. As we approach the sixth century, we find a long development of very varying procedures along independent lines, and ending in the very reverse of agreement throughout the Churches of different countries. In one point, however, there seems to have been universal agreement, viz., that acts of contrition and confession, together with the reconciliation which followed, were purely ecclesiastical. While, for the most part, such acts of penance were, in the West, not public but private, they certainly were subject to the judgment of the bishop; he, or the presbyter representing him, was always the ministrant. Yet in Britain and Ireland there had grown up a different system; the disciplinary measures were conducted from the cloister. Different sins began to be catalogued after the manner of penal enactments, with the corresponding penance to be undergone before reconciliation. In the opening words of the Penitential of Columbanus, ”there must be a mensura paenitentiae” calculated according to the magnitude of the sins committed. What this missionary did not quite find in Gaul, according to the words of his biographer Jonas, viz., poenitentiae medicamenta et mortificationis amor, he brought to that country from his Irish home.

People from all parts soon flocked to his monastery at Luxeuil to partake of the benefit of the ”medicine of penance” (Vita Col., 2). Books containing such rules, by which sins and the appointed penances were thus arranged in order, were called PENITENTIALS (Libri Poenitentiales). They seem to have had their origin in Britain and Ireland, but, after the seventh century, they are found both in the English Church, and in Churches far and wide over the Continent. Some who read the present Penitential, assigned to Gildas, for the first time, may be surprised, if not shocked, at some of the rules contained in it; but let them reflect that what they read here might be found almost anywhere in the seventh century, under the direction of men of singularly pure and saintly lives. The student of history will look upon them as phases of a life that is gone for ever; he is not called upon to censure what is embodied in Penitential Books, nor to set up a defence of them. It is simply necessary that

he should take a right position to view their strange and elaborate directions. These must be looked upon as means through which men of deep moral earnestness, such as Dewi Sant and Gildas in Wales, Finnian, Comgall and Columbanus in Ireland and France, sought to take away the curse of uncleanness out of the lives of man. In their method, they mention things to which we hardly ever allude, but so does St.

Augustine in his " Enquiries of Pope Gregory," and so before him did St. Jerome, in his celebrated letter to a young lady of the highest family connections at Rome. We feel that no pastor would now even think of what is detailed in Interrogatio Augustini VIII, as given by Beda (1,27); that Epistola 22 of Jerome "handles, without the slightest reserve, sins and temptations of the flesh to which we now hardly allude. It is absolutely inconceivable that any moralist or preacher of our times, however earnest or fanatical, should address a woman in such a style. The writer from whom I quote these words adds: "The difference of tone between the ancients and ourselves should never be forgotten in studying the character of a distant past. By keeping it in mind we may be saved alike from pharisaism, and from an ungenerous judgment of times which have made a self-revelation of which we should be incapable."

To me, these Penitentials are reminders of the fierce conflict waged against the wild immorality of olden times: a conflict which, with many failures, proved that the clumsy method of these rules turned out to be for good. Haupt, in his Kirchengeschichte Deutsch-lands, describes the results of the method in the hands of Columbanus in Gaul as "blissful" (segensreich). Yet it was doomed to die; in no way could it continue, however useful for a time. References will be made in the Notes to several Penitentials, such as the Penitentials of Finnian, of Columbanus and others; on that account it may be of advantage to place here the following brief resume of facts. The monasteries of which we read such fabulous accounts as to the number of monks congregated in them, belong to the end of Gildas' time; belong, as may be conjectured, to the revival begun by him and his friends. Such a one was Bangor is y Coed, in Flintshire, which, according to Beda's description, had no less than 2,100 monks within its walls: such were Clonard, Clonfert, Clon-macnoise, and Bangor, in Ireland. The founder of Clonard was Finnian, who is also regarded as the father of the new monastic revival which led to the foundation of so vast a number of monasteries in Ireland. But he is also said to have come, as a boy of thirteen years, to Kilmuine (Cil-mynyw) in Wales, where he became a disciple of "the three holy men, David, Cathmael, and Gildas." . This is the Finnian whose Penitential is extant, which seems to form a further link in his connection with Gildas.

Bennchor, or Bangor (in county Down), was founded by Com-gall, who in his early training had come in contact with the same Welshmen and Welsh traditions as Finnian. When, therefore, we remember that Columbanus was a monk of Bangor, as he with twelve companions left his native island for France, pro Deo peregrinantes, we are led to connect him also with that band of Welshmen. For the use of his monastery at Luxeuil he drew up a Rule that was notably Irish in its strictness; but besides this Regula, there goes under his name a

Penitential, which, with characteristic modifications and enlargements, is based upon that of Finnian. I do not now touch upon the question of the non-genuineness of certain parts of the Penitential in the form preserved to us, but refer to the fact that we have certainly, in a large section of it, a code of rules closely connected with the Irish Penitential of Finnian, and the Welsh Penitential of Gildas.

In the same line with these we find a fourth, which bears the name of Cummean, or Commean, or Kumin. This Penitentiale Cummeani contains materials that have a British, Irish, English and Frankish origin; for instance, the first four rules of the British Penitential printed below, appear there, and in the same order (Cumm. Penit., ii, 23-26); but what impresses one still more is, that rule 14 below (which is shown to be probably a quotation from some early source, by its use of tamen), is found also in the middle of the Preface attached to the Penitential of Cummean (vide Notes). Who this Cummean was, is not known, though the influence of his collection appears to have spread over a very large area. Of many so-called, the best known is one that was Abbot of Iona from 657 to 665, who is also the author of the oldest Life of Columba. Another of the name, styled bishop, is found at Bobbio (an Irish monastery at the foot of the Apennines, founded by Columbanus in 612), about the first half of the eighth century, during the reign of the Longobard King Luitprand. Wasserschleben is inclined to regard the latter as the author of the Penitential that was so very extensively used on the continent.

In the English Church a collection of rules, that is a Penitential, is attributed to Archbishop Theodore, and called the Penitential of Theodore. The influence of this book seems to have been very wide, but it contains many traces of the three first named. Another Penitential is ascribed to the historian Beda, while a third bears the name of Egbert, Archbishop of York. Theodore died A.D. 690, Beda 735, Egbert 767. While the question of authorship, or of the genuineness of certain portions need not be discussed here, there can be no doubt as to the extensive use of these books in the English and other Churches. One of doubtful authenticity has not been named; it is found with the title The Book of David (Liber Davidis), and is ascribed to David of Menevia, or, as better known, Dewi Sant: others have, as well, been left unmentioned. [All footnotes renumbered and placed at the end]

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.