

Confession, Reform, and Social Practice in Counter-Reformation Lombardy

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Scholars have long recognized the importance of confession in the history of early-modern European religion. As is well known, sin and forgiveness formed one of the strategic issues over which the Reformation conflict was fought out. Protestant reformers denied confession sacramental status, and did away with it as an essential Christian duty. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, as it reformed itself according to the directives of the Council of Trent, confirmed and re-launched the traditional sacrament of penance without major doctrinal changes. Despite this apparent continuity, recent interpretations have suggested that confession emerged in the Counter-Reformation with its social functions profoundly altered. A frequent, intense, and personalized use of the sacrament, it has been argued, contributed to a slow privatization and internalization of the Catholic religious experience. The introduction of the confessional is frequently cited as a material expression of this transformation; ritual innovation is thus found to be indicative of deep socio-religious change.

Taking these suggestions as its starting point, my dissertation *Sinews of Discipline: The Uses of Confession in Counter-Reformation Milan*¹ examines the social practices related to the sacrament of penance in the diocese of Milan. Under the guidance of Archbishop Carlo Borromeo (1564-84), and to a lesser extent of his successors Gaspare Visconti (1584-95) and Federico Borromeo (1595-1631), the Lombard bishopric was turned into a much debated and imitated testing ground of the Tridentine reforms. For the purposes of the modern historian, it constitutes an ideal vantage point from which to observe the assumed changes in the routines of confession.

This study finds itself at the crossroads of two different historical discussions. First, it is part of a growing body of research on the "social

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practice" of confession (as opposed to its theological foundations, legal implications, and pastoral objectives) across a time frame encompassing the medieval, early-modern and modern periods. Despite a wealth of new insights much of this research has remained seriously limited in scope (a flaw reinforced by an undeniably one-sided and intractable documentation). Scholars have focused their attention mainly on normative, pastoral, and doctrinal sources. The obvious danger has been that of losing sight (in practice, if not in principle) of the fundamental distinction between norms and ideals, on the one hand, and social practice, on the other. All too often, the former have been read as a direct reflection of the latter. This is not to suggest that norms can or should be ignored for the purposes of a social history of confession; rather, that they should be held for what they are. In this vein, the present study examines decrees of councils and synods, manuals for confessors, and episcopal instructions in an attempt to reconstruct the purpose, unity, and social implications of the Borromean reform. But its ambition has been to go further than this: to gather an additional documentation that may allow us to view the normative sources in their context, shedding light on the social circumstances to which they reacted and by which they were themselves conditioned, in a continuous back-and-forth of pressures and responses, adjustments and refusals, conflicts and compromises. In short, the purpose has been to highlight the interactive nature of confession.

This is an approach that is mostly lacking in the existing literature. In his pioneering *History of Auricular Confession* (1896) Henry Charles Lea characterized confession as a tool of an ultramontanist Church aiming at domination over the individual conscience. A more recent historiographical tradition has adopted this judgment in barely concealed form by describing confession as an instrument of social control. Nonetheless, the working of confession as a tool of power and control has hardly been made into a subject of research, and has to a large degree retained its axiomatic character.

An adequate examination of this question is especially desirable for the Counter-Reformation period. Recent research on confessionalization and social discipline in early-modern Europe (the second discussion to which this study is meant to contribute) has overwhelmingly indicated that many post-Reformation churches, often in conjunction with secular institutions, saw fit to redirect their internal religious and social life according to a model of strict central and hierarchical control. The post-Tridentine Italian bishoprics are no exception to this rule; Milan can even be called exemplary in this respect. For the student of confession the obvious, and obviously crucial, question arises to what extent the routines of confession were affected by the winds of social discipline, both in

theory and in practice. For here, too, the distinction between institution and social practice, and the focus on the interaction between these two, are of the essence.

The structure of the study follows logically from these preliminary considerations. The first part is devoted to the normative source materials, which are particularly abundant for the period of Carlo Borromeo and can be found especially in the monumental and widely influential *Acta Ecclesiae Mediolanensis*. It confirms that the Milanese authorities throughout our period conceived of confession as a critically important disciplinary instrument that would benefit not only the individual soul but society as a whole. They were equally aware, however, of confession's peculiarity as a one-on-one procedure protected by the seal of confession, which determined both its efficacy and the limits of its impact.

From the outset, the weight of the Milanese reforms rested most heavily on the confessors' shoulders. Yet in a paradoxical coincidence, confession became a centerpiece of episcopal policy at a time in which the same confessors were widely found lacking in knowledge, conduct, and general lifestyle. Church authorities attempted to correct or prevent the many alleged "abuses" by subjecting confessors to frequent examinations, visitations, bureaucratic check-ups and other controls. Initially these forms of discipline constituted probably not much more than immediate responses intended to restore the badly damaged credibility and functionality of the sacrament of penance. In the parlance of the day, "abuses" required "remedies." But soon these "remedies" were to reveal an underlying purpose that went much further than that of corrective action: confessors were turned into indispensable executors of episcopal policy and, as such, a crucial chain in the Catholic line of command. The diverse and often unruly crowd of confessors, regular as well as secular, was to become a well-trained and loyal body of functionaries obeying the logic of a strictly hierarchical organization.

Underlying this project was a fairly simple but strongly held view of the purpose of confession. The practical and procedural rules contained in Carlo Borromeo's "Instructions for Confessors" (*Avvertenze ... ai Confessori*, 1574) find their unity in a stubborn and consistent attempt to turn confession into an effective instrument of behavioral change. Upon further analysis, this text, a classic of the modern advice literature for confessors, reveals an utterly pessimistic outlook on human behavior, in particular on free will. A sternly disciplinary approach to confession was needed precisely because of man's reluctance to change. In this view, sin had a strong social component: it was the social environment that accounted for much of its origin and tenacity. Lechery flourished in

taverns, blasphemy in the military, usury and fraud in the world of trade and commerce. These milieus, or "occasions of sin" (*occasiones peccati*), were therefore to become a main target of corrective action in the confessional. Confessors were not only to punish sin committed, but to prevent new sins or a return to old ones by lifting their penitents out of the social "occasions" that were considered harmful; in many cases these were deeply rooted and institutionalized forms of social life. It is this novel and highly significant policy that explains much of the resistance that the Borromeo reform efforts encountered, in the confessional and outside.

An instrument of individual discipline was thus thought to have important social ramifications. A generation after Carlo Borromeo's initial reforms, his cousin Federico Borromeo drew the full consequences of this position when he described confession as a crucial form of social discipline, even as the most "refined way of governing" the Christian republic, and when he likened the confessors to "the fibers, arteries, and sinews of the body of the holy Church." However, Federico Borromeo was acutely aware of the idiosyncracies of confession. On the one hand, the guarantee of confidentiality allowed functionaries of the Church (hence servants of a public authority) access to the private lives of all adult members of Catholic society. On the other hand, the same secrecy of confession imposed significant limits when it came to verifying the content of confessions and imposing behavioral change. This was the key difference with most other forms of juridical intervention or social discipline, which allowed legal investigation, interrogation of witnesses, and public sentencing and punishment. In the theory of confession, only public sins formed an exception to this rule: an old principle dictated that public sin was to be expiated with public penance. Milanese authorities, following the lead of the Council of Trent, sought to revive this decayed practice, in a clear indication that they wished to maximize the disciplinary potential of confession within the formal limits imposed by traditional canon law.

The precarious balance between public and private was also affected by the introduction of the confessional, no doubt the most significant and lasting innovation in the ritual of confession. But its purpose goes counter to many commonly held assumptions about a growing "privatization" in the practice of confession.

Various elements of the preceding analysis may help to clarify the development of the confessional. Rather than addressing an increasing need for privacy, the reform of the ritual of confession was a reaction to alleged sexual "abuses" between confessors and (mostly) female penitents (*sollicitatio ad turpia*), or at least the fear that the encounter between the two might take an undesirable turn. To a degree the risks were considered inherent in the nature of confession, both as a rare

opportunity for private contact between women and priests, and as a required moment to discuss matters of an intimate and reprehensible nature. In this sense, confession itself constituted an "occasion of sin," or a social setting conducive to sinful behavior.

The confessional was meant to minimize the risks of this "occasion" in two ways. First, an open construction and the prohibition of doors, curtains, and other enclosing devices around the confessor or penitent, enhanced the publicity and therefore controllability of the act of confession. The same purpose was served by requiring the new church furniture to be placed in an open spot, preferably the nave, of the church, and by forbidding the existing use of private cells (or even the private home) for the hearing of confessions. Confession was emphatically to become more public, rather than private. Second, a panel with grill separating the confessor and penitent was to prevent any physical, and especially visual, contact between the two. This innovation was based on a precise conception of the working of the senses, in particular vision, and the risks any unguarded use of the senses entailed. The design can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to discipline the senses.

These conclusions do much to clarify the background and principles of the Borromeo reform program; but they do not by themselves reach beyond the walls of the archiepiscopal palace. The second part of this study sets out to do just that by turning to archival materials that reflect the strategies employed by the Milanese church authorities to implement their program, the situations they encountered, and the responses they elicited. These materials are the residue of the incessant stream of reports on standard inspections (such as visitations) held throughout the diocese, and the equally numerous letters and dossiers on specific issues that piled up on the diocesan office desks. These sources allow us precious glimpses into the confessional: into the patterns of lay attendance, into the details of urgent problems, and into the solutions or compromises that were worked out between penitents, confessors, and higher authorities.

Most Lombard adults no doubt met the minimal Catholic requirement to confess once a year. Beyond that we can distinguish two different regimes. First, there was a routine we can call seasonal and ritual. It consisted of an annual confession preceding Easter and more occasional confessions on other important feast days or special occasions like a jubilee; it also included the confession of the dying, the sick, the pregnant, or those who were otherwise confronting danger, such as travelers or soldiers. Second, there was "frequent" confession. This practice made a regular (monthly, weekly, or even more frequent) visit to

the confessional into the centerpiece of an ongoing spiritual program based on the daily examination of one's conscience.

The social functions of these two regimes differed greatly. The Easter confession was a traditional form of periodical reconciliation, presenting penitents with the obligation to settle any conflicts they might have with their neighbors. Frequent confession aimed at the life of inner devotion and discipline, in which penitents entrusted themselves to a confessor turned director of conscience. In a marked break with traditional patterns of lay devotion, it substituted (or supplemented) the rhythms of the liturgical year with those of the solar calendar.

The success, and therefore the impact, of this innovation is more difficult to fathom. Whereas the Easter confession remained the high point of a yearly routine of penance and reconciliation, diocesan sources do not inform us to what extent frequent confession flourished along its side. Heavily promoted by diocesan authorities, it had the best chance of catching on in organizations of lay and conventual piety; in fact, the reorganized and revitalized confraternities made it part of their required devotions. How much it spread outside these circles remains doubtful.

No matter what form confession took, diocesan officials (in particular the penitentiary) were faced with the difficulty of controlling its practice while respecting its secrecy. Thus they developed intricate bureaucratic systems to keep track of annual confessions as well as the confessors in charge of these. They reached out at the substance of confession by advising or even requiring ordinary confessors to withhold absolution for such problematic issues as incest, counterfeiting currency or blasphemy, and refer these to the Milanese curia. In this way the solution of these problems was entrusted to the care and authority of the central leadership. It was then up to the latter to call the sinner to Milan or to grant a local priest the right of absolution. Apart from settling the individual case, this mechanism also allowed the diocesan officials to define, and constantly adjust, a general policy on the issue at hand. Subsequently, such policies often found their way to synodal decrees, instructions, edicts, lists of reserved cases, and sermons.

In Borromeoan Milan this system of referral was exploited to the fullest. Parishioners were faced with the refusal of absolution (often resulting in interdict or excommunication) whenever the stern principles of the archbishop opposed local uses, whether it concerned economic life, marital customs, or forms of public entertainment. The effects of this legalistic procedure on confession were probably mixed. On the one hand, the real threat of intervention from above considerably strengthened the confessors' hand in dealing with reluctant penitents. On the other hand, all too frequent disciplinary action, such as interdict or excommunication,

could easily break down against concerted local resistance. The reason was a simple one: local religious life could be stopped only for so long. Where controversial norms, such as prohibitions against dance, games and theatrical performance, led to massive refusals of absolution, readmission to the sacraments soon proved a social necessity and often became a simple bureaucratic procedure. In other cases, penitents responded by avoiding the scrutiny of their parish clergy. If they did not do so by selective suppression of their sins in the confessional, they could take them to a confessor who they believed to be more favorably inclined. The Borromean model of discipline required not only a well-oiled hierarchical machinery, but also a degree of local social control that proved impossible to achieve.

Aside from the problematic cases that were brought before the bishop and his collaborators, the ordinary practice of confession was left completely in the hands of the confessor and his penitent. Here the bishop and his collaborators could at best exert indirect influence. Strongly aware of this, Carlo Borromeo devoted special energies to new institutions of clerical supervision, instruction, and (re-)education. *Vicari foranei*, or rural vicars, were to form a new link in the diocesan hierarchy by exercising control over the rural clergy on behalf of the bishop. A special forum for this control was an obligatory monthly meeting that each *vicario foraneo* had to convene and chair in his district. In a general sense, these gatherings helped break the isolation of a strongly localized clergy and ease the professionalization of this group. More specifically, required discussions on problematic cases of conscience were to increase the competence of the local confessors and address the particular needs of the district. Surviving registers of these discussions do indeed reveal a growing sophistication. They also indicate what these priests considered relevant or problematic, and thus furnish valuable clues about the confessional practice itself. A strong emphasis on socio-economic issues, such as usury and restitution, suggests that at the parish level confession had preserved its importance as a procedure of reconciliation. This is confirmed by an almost complete lack of interest for sins of thought or intention, such as lecherous dreams.

How should we imagine this range of direct and indirect diocesan pressures and interventions to have affected the working of confession itself? A rich dossier on an allegedly superstitious healing practice, compiled around the turn of the sixteenth century, allows a striking insight into the dynamics, complexity, and obstacles of diocesan reform. As early as the 1560s and 1570s Carlo Borromeo had called in the army of confessors to help suppress any practices considered superstitious. This had not kept the clergy of Sforzatica and environs from tolerating the

magical therapy practiced by the peasant Bartolomeo Locatello and several other healers in the 1590s. A change came about only when a Milanese official happened to be informed about the cure, investigated it, and condemned it. Yet it took a lengthy meeting with the local clergy, including a theological discussion on the concept of superstition, to convince them that the therapy was to be considered unorthodox, and that their notion of superstition consequently required revision.

In conclusion, this study reclaims attention for a key element of Counter-Reformation religiosity. Its sources are to a large degree the documentary residue of a program designed to streamline confession, and to integrate it in a system of diocesan control. This program was both ambitious in scope and modest in means. On the one hand, it was comprehensive, and very serious about that goal: it wished to reach every last soul in the community, affect the lay world at large, and penetrate into areas previously untouched (or touched only remotely) by central Church authority. On the other hand, this very broadness of scope implied limitations in depth: church authorities could only hope to enforce minimum standards (such as annual confession), and had to back down from several of their most cherished policies (such as the prohibition of Carnival celebrations). The case of superstition perfectly summarizes the enduring weaknesses and new strengths of the system: detection and suppression remained dependent on local attitudes, of penitents and confessors alike; institutional control over the lower clergy opened the way for changing local attitudes, although we do not know with what success.

Whenever the limits of disciplinary action were reached, what remained was to exhort and to convince. The rhetorical force of preaching and other forms of pastoral instruction was a key ingredient of the Borromeo project. It would be unwise to underestimate its power. The Counter-Reformation spirituality touted in that rhetoric probably reached many more than Borromeo's core of loyal clergy alone, spreading especially through the seminary, the lay confraternity, and the monastic house. And although much of the internal life of these institutions remains unknown, they provided at least a better chance at success for devotional programs that were impossible to require of the general public. There, if anywhere, a frequent, personalized and internalized regime of confession may have flourished. To generalize these programs was no doubt the ultimate goal of the Borromeo project; but the working and reception of his more modest reforms suggest that this goal remained confined to the drawing-board of acts, decrees, edicts, and instructions.

Finally, this research has drawn a picture that is predominantly synchronic. The particular density and richness of the source materials for

the period of Carlo Borromeo has led us to highlight those dramatic years. His immediate successors, Gaspare Visconti and Federico Borromeo, fully adopted the legislation of the *Acta Ecclesiae Mediolanensis*, only marginally supplementing it to facilitate implementation. Archival materials such as congregation registers confirm the impression of overall normative and institutional continuity. They are generally not rich enough to justify an attempt at diachronic analysis. Allowing ourselves nonetheless to speculate about the lasting effects of the Borromean reform of confession, it would be worth stressing the following points. The Counter-Reformation bishops of Milan were able to erect an institutional structure of guidance and control that remained functional into the twentieth century. The immediate disciplinary effect on public as well as private life was probably far more limited than was intended. Still, a fairly uniform routine of confession developed, which became an important factor in shaping the mental habits and skills of both clergy and lay people. It offered, and imposed, regular practice in interpreting and judging the social realities of their lives in terms of Catholic moral theology.

