

BOOK REVIEWS

HANDLING SIN: CONFESSION IN THE MIDDLE AGES, edited by PETER BILLER and ALISTAIR J. MINNIS, York Studies in Medieval Theology 2, York Medieval Press, 1998, x + 219 pp (hardback £35) ISBN 0-95297341-3.

According to the Canon 21 (*Omnis utriusque sexus*) of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, pastors were granted the exclusive right to hear the confessions of their parishioners in the fulfilment of the precept of annual confession. In the view of many authors at the time, the precept was not fulfilled unless the confession was made to one's proper pastor; confession of sins made contrary to this decree made the absolution invalid, and the penitent was required to repeat the confession to the pastor. This disposition of the law regarding fulfilment of the precept of annual confession was the source of endless disputes between diocesan and regular clergy in general, and the mendicant orders in particular. The latter claimed the right to hear confessions during the Paschal season in virtue of papal privileges; legislation regarding this question is found as late as 1670 (Clement X, constitution *Superna*, 21st June 1670).

Innocent IV (1243–1254) explained the wisdom of the law which demanded periodic confession to one's own pastor in his constitution *Etsi animarum* (21st November 1254). The yearly confession of sins was often the only means within the hands of the pastor to ascertain the spiritual condition of his flock. He was responsible to God for the condition of his flock; therefore it was only right that he should have the authority to correct abuses, to strengthen the wavering, and to weed out errors of his flock. Furthermore, the concomitant element of shame in the confession of his sins to a priest who knew him personally was frequently a strong deterrent for the penitent against the commission of sin.

To prepare or at least assist pastors in this responsibility, numerous manuals for confessors were produced throughout the middle ages; these manuals are central to the studies presented in *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*. This volume contains papers delivered at a conference held by the University of York's Centre for Medieval Studies at King's Manor, York, on 9th March 1996, under the title 'Confession in Medieval Culture and Society.' It concludes with the second of the Annual Quodlibet Lectures on medieval theology, which was delivered by John Baldwin on 5th June 1996.

As is only to be expected in a collection of this sort, the papers range in quality from worthy to execrable. Three in particular should be marked out for special attention: Peter Biller's introduction sets the stage for the other studies contained in this volume, presents a valuable overview of Catholic legislation and practice as set off against the Waldensians and Cathars, and contains a good survey of current scholarship on the nature of confessors' manuals in the middle ages; Alexander Murray studies the difficulties both penitents and confessors were presented with in complying with Lateran IV's Canon requiring annual confession; and Michael Haren's fascinating presentation on the *Memoriale presbiterorum* gives an example of a fourteenth-century manual. Haren's paper is followed by his edition and translation of the interrogatories for officials, lawyers and secular estates of the *Memoriale presbiterorum*.

Most of the papers seek to discover what they can about the lives of lay persons in the middle ages through an examination of the questions contained in the confessor's manuals. This is a risky endeavour, resting on the (somewhat questionable) assumption that confessors' manuals would only contain the kind of questions most frequently asked by confessors. One paper routinely refers to the confessors' manuals as 'idiot's guides'—either a gratuitously offensive slur or a misfired attempt at humour. It is also risky to extrapolate from the remains of what is, by its nature, a secret exchange, to satisfy the prying (and, in the case of several papers, prurient) interest of modern scholars.

What is clear in a wider context is the substantial change in literature for confessors that took place after the Council of Trent and the introduction of seminary education for clergy in the Roman Catholic Church. While the anti-clerical polemics of the middle ages (and some modern medievalists) cannot be taken at face value, it is nonetheless true that the portrayal of the rude, bumbling and uneducated village priest must have had enough real life parallels to make the parody recognisable. After Trent, however, works for confessors blossom into major treatises of scholarship, such as that of Alphonsus Ligouri. The papers in this collection have consciously excluded mediaeval scholarship on penance and the related canon law (such as Raymond of Pennafort's *Summa de penitentia*) as having little effect on actual practice; while that might be true in the thirteenth century (although I think we would need to look more carefully before buying into that assumption completely), it is certainly not true after Trent. From the multi-volume works of Alphonsus to the pocket manuals of writers like Prümmer, various manuals of moral theology for confessors continued to be popular well into the 1950s.

Where they all disappeared to is a great mystery. Although there are certainly still courses taught in the administration of the sacrament of penance in Catholic seminaries, the old manuals are distinctly out of favour, and no new ones have appeared to take their place. The aphorism that 'whenever a priest fails, he turns into a counsellor', like the mediaeval anti-clerical polemics, contains enough basis in reality to ring true: but counselling is not the same as pastoral care. While it is true that in some places the hearing of confessions is taught as a sub-species of counselling, there is little or no literature to fill in the gaps of preparation for modern confessors. This is all the more troubling when the words of Lateran IV's Canon 17 are brought to mind: *cura animarum est ars artium*.

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WIDENING THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE: Access to Church Buildings for People with Disabilities by JOHN PENTON, Church House Publishing, London, 1999, 64pp (A4 Paperback £7.95) ISBN 0-7151-7581-5.

This guidance booklet opens with a concise overview of the recent rise of concern for the rights of disabled people and its embodiment in legislation, culminating in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The implications of this Act for churches as 'service providers' are outlined by setting out its scope and requirements and the phased programme for its implementation. There follows a section outlining the legislative framework of controls over alterations to church buildings, listed and unlisted, giving a summary of the guidance issued by English Heritage where alterations to historic buildings have to be considered in order to comply with the Act and introducing the concept of 'accessibility audits'. Examples of changes of management policy, practices and procedure are given, but the bulk of the book is devoted to a comprehensive and fully illustrated guide to technical means of satisfying the physical implications of the Act. Finally, there are useful (photocopiable) check-lists for use in carrying out accessibility audits of premises where services are provided.

This is as clear, readable, comprehensive and well-illustrated a guide as could be wished for, and will be invaluable to those responsible for the inspection, management and adaptation of churches, church halls and other church property—including parsonages and manses where these are used for pastoral purposes. It represents the best current advice on the subject, and will probably remain the most helpful guide where church buildings are concerned, even after publication of the promised Code of Practice for satisfying the requirements of the Act generally.