

# Peter Lombard, *Sentences*

## On Penitence

Translation from: Ignatius Brady, ed. (1981) *Petri Lombardi Sententiae in IV libris distinctae*, 3rd ed., 2 vols., Spicilegium bonaventurianum 5, Grottaferrata: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 2.315-324<sup>1</sup>

### BOOK 4, DISTINCTION 14

#### Chapter 1 (74)

1. *On penitence.* After these things we must treat of penitence. Penitence is necessary for those set far away [from God], so that they may draw near.<sup>2</sup> For, as Jerome says, ‘there is a second plank after a shipwreck’,<sup>3</sup> for if someone should corrupt the clothes of innocence gained through baptism by sinning, /316/ he can repair them by the remedy of penitence. The first plank is baptism, where the old man is shed and the new man put on; the second is penitence, whereby we arise anew after a fall: when the returned old age is driven back, and the lost renewed state is recovered. After baptism the fallen are able to be renewed through penitence, but not through baptism: although a man may do penance often, he may not be baptized anew. *cf. Eph. 4:22-24.*

2. Baptism is only a sacrament, but penitence is called both a sacrament and virtue of the mind. For penitence is both interior and exterior. The sacrament is exterior; the virtue of the mind is interior; and both are the cause of justification and salvation. But we shall consequently investigate whether all exterior penitence is the sacrament, or, if not all, what [part] is to be understood by this name [penitence].

3. The preaching of John the Baptist begins with penitence, saying: *Do penitence, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.* What the herald taught, *Mt. 3:2*

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1. All references to other authors (except the passing note to Cicero) derive from Brady’s fuller *apparatus fontium*.
  2. A reference to Augustine, *Enn. in Ps.* 94.1.2 (CCSL 39.1331s.): ‘Through good morals one draws near God; through bad morals, one retreats from God. . . . The Psalm says *Come*, therefore, to those set far away and living wickedly.’
  3. *Ep.* 130.9 (CSEL 56.189). The operative idea is that one needs to grab a-hold of a plank of the ship in order to stay afloat. Cf. Cicero, *De officiis* 3.23.89.

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moreover, Truth preached the same afterwards, taking the starting point of  
*Mt. 4:17* His sermon from penitence.

## Chapter 2 (75)

1. *Why it is called penitence.* Penitence is so-called from punishing, whereby one punishes the illicit things that he has done. The virtue of penitence  
*cf. Is. 26:18* is born of fear. Hence Isiah: *We have conceived and acquired the spirit of salvation, O Lord, from fear of you.*<sup>4</sup>

2. ‘It is penitence’, as Ambrose says, ‘to mourn past evils and /317/ to not commit them again.’<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Gregory:<sup>6</sup> ‘it is penitence to weep over past deeds, and to not commit the ones which ought to be wept over. For he who deplores some things in such a way that he still commits them either still does not know how to do penance, or pretends to do it. Indeed, how does it benefit if someone weeps over the sins of extravagance, and is still breathless with the stirrings of avarice?’

3. Those who cling more strongly to these words maintain truly that a penitent person no longer sins damnably; and if he sinned grievously, that he has not passed beyond the reach of (*praecessisse*) true penitence. This is a point they strengthen with other testimonies.

4. Indeed, Isidore says:<sup>7</sup> ‘He scoffs, and is not penitent, who still does what he repents. Nor does he seem to ask God as a subordinate, but to sneer as a proud man—a *dog returned to his vomit*, a penitent to his sin. Many people pour forth tears ceaselessly, and do not cease to sin. I see them begin the tears for penitence, and they do not have the disposition of penitence: for now they pour forth tears now with an inconstant mind and in memory of sin, now they commit again those things they wept over when  
*Is. 1:16* the custom revives. Isiah says of sinners: *Wash yourselves, be clean.* He is washed and clean who weeps past deeds and does not admit again what are to be wept over. He is washed and not clean who weeps over that he did and does not stop, and who repeats what he was wept over after the tears.’

4. These last two sentences both use the verb *concipere*, which can mean ‘to receive, catch, derive (from), devise, understand, or conceive’; ‘conceive’ seemed the best choice here. As the editor noted, this passage derives from a different version than the Vulgate.

5. *Sermo* 25.1 (PL 17.655A–B). This sermon is no longer considered to be Ambrose’s.

6. *In Evang.* hom. 34.15 (PL 76.1256B).

7. *Sententiae* 2.16.1–4 (PL 83.619B–C).

5. Similarly, Augustine:<sup>8</sup> ‘Penitence is worthless which a following sin defiles.’ Laments benefit nothing if sins are repeated. To ask forgiveness from evils while repeating them anew is of no value. Similarly, Gregory:<sup>9</sup> ‘He who weeps over admitted deeds and does not stop doing them subjects himself to a more serious punishment.’

6. Similarly, Ambrose:<sup>10</sup> ‘Very often are they found who luxuriate in Christ, who think that penitence is to be done. For if they would truly do penitence in Christ, they would not think it should be done again afterwards, for just as baptism is one, so penitence is one.’ — They use these and many other opinions in the assertion of their opinion. /318/

7. But Ambrose says:<sup>11</sup> ‘This is true penitence: to cease from sin.’ And, similarly:<sup>12</sup> ‘To have renounced an error is the result (*profectus*) of a great thing, for to lay bare and correct souls imbued with vice is the mark of perfect virtue and celestial grace.’

### Chapter 3 (76)

1. *What is penitence?* And, thus, it can be soundly defined in this way: Penitence is a virtue by which we lament and hate committed evils with the intention of emendation, and by which we do not want to commit any more what should be lamented. For true penitence is to grieve in soul and hate vice in such a way.

2. *A determination of the previous words.* Hence those [previous words](#), ‘to mourn past evils and to not commit them again’, can rightly be understood in such a way that they are referred not to diverse times, but to the same time: so that, namely, at the time when one weeps over the committed evils, he does not commit what should be wept over in will or in deed. This is understood in the following words: ‘For he who deplores some things in such a way’ etc. Augustine says for this reason:<sup>13</sup> ‘One must take precaution so that he not think those unspeakable crimes (of which sort they who *shall* 1 Cor. 6:9 *not possess the kingdom of God* commit) are to be perpetrated daily and redeemed by daily alms. For it is better that the life be changed and that

8. Rather, Isidore, *Synonyma* 1.77 (PL 83.845A).

9. *Regula pastoralis* 3.30 (PL 77.110A–B).

10. *De unica poenitentia* 2.10.95 (CSEL 73.200).

11. Ambrosiaster, *In 2 Cor.* 2.7 (CSEL 81/2.207).

12. Ambrosiaster, *In Ps.* 118.169 (CSEL 62.489).

13. *In Enchir.* 70 (CCSL 46.87), referring to the crimes mentioned in 1 Cor. 6:9–10.

God is to be won over from past sins by means of alms, not that he is to be bought for this in some way, so that it be licit always to commit these things with impunity. In fact, he gave no one a relaxation for sinning; even if, *if* a congruent satisfaction is not neglected, he might completely destroy committed sins out of compassion.’ Similarly Pope Pius:<sup>14</sup> /319/ ‘Should the mind not be recalled from iniquity, fasting, praying, and doing other works of religion benefits no man.’ The person, therefore, who recalls his mind from evil in such way that he weeps over committed deeds and does not wish to commit what is to be wept over, and does not neglect to make satisfaction, is truly penitent. Nor is it not true penitence for the same reason: because he will perhaps sin afterwards, but by chance or weakness, not by intention.

3. Moreover, he ‘**He scoffs, and is not penitent**’, who weeps over committed deeds in such a way that he does not cease from committing what ought to be wept over in will or deed. Also, he **who repeats after the tears what he wept over is washed for a time, but is not clean**; that is that cleanness is not sufficient for his salvation, for it is momentary, not persevering.

4. Similarly the claim ‘**Penitence is worthless which a following sin defiles**’, is to be understood so: A thing is worthless, namely lacking the fruit of penitence, which a following sin does not stain. For its fruit is the avoidance of Hell and the acquisition of glory. For that penitence is mortified,<sup>15</sup> and so are the other, earlier good acts through the subsequent sin; so that they drew the wage that they deserved when they were done, and which they would have had sin not followed. But even if penitence is done concerning the succeeding sin, both the penitence which preceded and the other, earlier good acts are revived: but only those that issue from charity. For only those live that come to pass in charity; and, therefore, if they be mortified by means of subsequent sins, they can be revived through subsequent penitence. But dead and empty things are generated from what are done without charity; and thus they cannot be revived by means of penitence.

5. The claim, ‘**Laments benefit nothing**’ etc., and ‘**is of no value**’, is to be similarly understood. For if sins should be repeated, the preceding lamenting is of no value for salvation or for forgiveness at the end because

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14. *Decretales Ps.-Isidori* (PL 130.112C).

15. The verb *mortificare* literally means ‘to make die’ or ‘to become dead’ (though it need not have this strong meaning).

nothing is left over from the cleanness of life. For, either the dismissed sins return, as is pleasing to some, when they are repeated; or, if they do not return, even with them destroyed, one is established so guilty and unclean due to his ingratitude (since he is still implicated in what is to be expiated) that they return even if already destroyed! Yet we shall treat more fully whether sins may return later on.<sup>16</sup> /320/

6. Similarly ‘To ask forgiveness from evils while repeating them anew is of no value’ for the sake of obtaining salvation or having a clean life. So, too, is what Augustine says elsewhere to be understood:<sup>17</sup> ‘Penitence is a certain vindication of the grieving, punishing in himself what he grieves to have allowed.’ And below:<sup>18</sup> ‘One must grieve over sin continuously; which is what the character of the word itself (*ipsa dictionis virtus*) declares: for “to repent” (*poenitere*) is to possess punishment (*poenam*) so that one always punish by avenging in one’s self what he committed by sinning. He possesses punishment who always vindicates what he grieves to have committed. Penitence is claimed, therefore, always punishing in itself what it grieves to have committed.’ ‘What remains to us but to grieve in life? For when grief is finished, penitence fails; but if penitence is finished, what remains of penitence? Let one rejoice and hope by grace as long as he is sustained by penitence. For the Lord says: *Go, and sin no more*. He did not say “May you not sin”, but “nor let the will to sin arise in you”. But how will it be preserved unless grief be safeguarded continuously in penitence? Let this one grieve always, and rejoice in grief; and let it not be enough that he grieve, but let him grieve from faith, and let him not always grieve to have grieved.’<sup>19</sup>

7. *A determination of the meaning of the quotations.* What he said above is to be understood regarding penitence of the perfect or penitence sufficient for salvation; namely ‘Penitence is a vindication always punishing what [he] has committed’, and the other sayings of this sort. But the claim, ‘if penitence is finished, nothing remains of penitence’, can be taken in two ways. For if, according to the understanding of some, dismissed sins return, it is easy to understand that nothing of forgiveness remains because the dismissed sins are repeated again. Indeed, just as he who is freed from servitude into liberty, while he is truly free, he may nonetheless be recalled

16. Below at D. 22 c. 1.

17. Ps.-Augustine, *De vera et falsa poenit.* 8.22 (PL 40.1120).

18. Ps.-Augustine, *De vera et falsa poenit.* 19.35 (PL 40.1128s.).

19. Ps.-Augustine, *De vera et falsa poenit.* 13.28 (PL 40.1124).

into servitude later on due to an offense; so sins are both truly dismissed from a penitent and yet they return again due to an offense which is repeated. If, however, they are said to not return, clearly it can be said also that nothing is left of forgiveness with the result /**321**/ not that the dismissed sins are imputed, but that, due to his ingratitude, he is thus established guilty and unclean—as if they returned.

#### Chapter 4 (77)

1. *On solemn and unique penitence.* The point that Ambrose says, ‘are they found’ etc., and ‘just as baptism is one, so penitence is one’ is a dictum understood not according to a general but special custom of the Church concerning solemn penitence, which, for some, having been celebrated once is not repeated. Similarly is Ambrose’s other point understood about solemn penitence:<sup>20</sup> ‘Penitence usurped once and not truly celebrated removes the fruit of a prior penitence, and admits the custom of the following one.’<sup>21</sup>

2. Solemn penitence, as Ambrose says in the same place,<sup>22</sup> is what is done outside of the Church, in the open, in ashes and a goat-hair covering (*cilicio*); which is only imposed for the more serious, horrifying, and manifest transgressions. And that is not to be repeated for reverence of the sacrament, so that it neither be cheapened nor become contemptible to men. Hence Augustine:<sup>23</sup> ‘Although precaution was taken carefully and salubriously so that a place for the most humble penitent would granted in the Church once, so that a common medicine, which is the more salubrious the less it would be contemptible, would not be less useful to the sick; nevertheless someone would still dare to say to God: “Why do you yet again spare this man, who, after the first /**322**/ repentance, binds himself once more in the snares of iniquity?”’

3. Origen also said this about solemn penitence, which is enjoined for more serious crimes:<sup>24</sup> ‘If some mortal fault should find us, which consists not in a mortal crime or blasphemy of the faith, but in a defect of speech or morals, this fault can always be repaired; nor is it forbidden sometimes

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20. *De poenitentia* 2.11.104 (CSEL 73.204).

21. In other words, the prior penance is lost and the person is left with the incomplete one which had followed.

22. Not at all true according to Brady; cf. 2.2.99 (CSEL 73.202).

23. *Ep.* 153.3.7 (CSEL 44.403).

24. See *Homilia* 15.2 (PG 12.560C561A).

to make penitence regarding such things. But not so regarding the more serious crimes: for in the more serious crimes a place is granted for penitence only once. Common things, which we frequently incur, always receive penitence, and are always atoned for.’ ‘Common things’ means venial sins, and perhaps certain mortal sins less serious than the others, which, as often as they are committed are as frequently atoned for. But regarding the more serious crimes, penitence—namely, solemn penitence—is done only once; on the other hand, of the other things, should they be repeated, penitence is repeated, but not solemn penitence. And yet this is not observed in some churches.

### Chapter 5 (78)

1. *It is proven*<sup>25</sup> *by authorities that not only once, that sins are dismissed often through penitence.* But that penitence is not done only once, but may be repeated frequently, and that through it forgiveness may be offered frequently, is proven by many testimonies of the saints.

2. For Augustine speaks so, writing against certain heretics who told sinners that penitence was only useful once:<sup>26</sup> ‘Still the treacherous stand near, not sober, but exceed their measure, because they know *more than is fitting*. They say: “Even if penitence is of value to sinners after baptism, /**323**/ nonetheless, repeated often it does not benefit them. Otherwise remission would be an invitation to sin” They say indeed: “Who would not always sin if he could always return?” In fact, they say that the Lord would be an inciter to sin, if he always helped penitents out; or that sins pleased him for which grace is always at hand. But they are wrong: for it is well known that sins greatly displease the one who is always ready to destroy them; if he loved them he would not always destroy so.’ *Rom. 12:3*

3. The same, *To Macedonius*:<sup>27</sup> ‘The iniquity of men advances sometimes so much, that even after the penitential act, even after the reconciliation of the altar, men still commit similar or worse things. And yet God also makes *his sun arise* over such men, and allots the most generous gifts of life and salvation, not less than he had allotted before. And although that place of penitence was not granted them in the Church, God still does not forget his *Mt. 5:45*

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25. Reading *probat* for *probat*.

26. *De vera et falsa poenit.* 5.110 (PL 40.1116s.).

27. *Epist.* 153.3.7 (CSEL 44.401ss.).

patience for them. From whose number if someone says to us: “Say whether something benefits me for the future life: if, in this life, I shall have despised the blandishments of the most enticing pleasure, if I shall have tortured myself in penitence more violently than before, if I shall have wept more copiously, if I shall have lived better, if I shall have sustained the poor more generously, if I shall have burned more brightly with charity?” Who among you is so foolish as to say to this man: “Those things will be of no benefit to you in the future; go, enjoy at least the sweetness of this life?” May God turn from such immense and sacrilegious insanity!

4. Similarly, John Chrysostom, *On the Reparation of the Fall*:<sup>28</sup> ‘Such, believe me!, such is the piety of God towards men: He never spurns penitence, if it be offered to him sincerely and simply. Even if someone should come to the heights of evil, and yet wishes to return thence to the way of virtue, he receives, embraces, gladly, and does it all so that he recalls them to their prior state. And what is still more excellent and noteworthy, even if someone could not complete the full order of making satisfaction, he still does not reject the penitent deed, made in how brief a time: he accepts it, nor does he allow the reward to go to waste, even though of a meager change.’ /324/

5. This same thing can be build upon by means of examples. For David  
2 Kgs. 12:13 obtained forgiveness through his penitence for adultery along with murder;  
 and yet he was serious at fault afterwords in the numbering of the people:  
2 Kgs. 24:10-15; 1 Par. 21:1-24 which the stricken multitude of the people shows. Ambrose, *On the Apology*  
1 Par. 21:17; 2 Kgs. 24:17 of David:<sup>29</sup> ‘It is an amazing thing that he offered himself to the angel  
 striking the crowd, saying: *What has this crowd done? Let you hand be*  
*turned against me and the house of my father.* With this done, he who was  
 thought unworthy of absolution was immediately judged worthy of sacrifice.  
cf. Ex. 32:31-32 Nor is it amazing if he acquired forgiveness on behalf of the people by means  
 of his offering, since Moses diluted the sins by offering himself for the error  
 of his people.’

6. It is clearly shown by these and many other testimonies that we rise  
 from sins through penitence not only once, but often; and that we can make  
Heb. 10:26 true penitence more often. *For a host*, says the Apostle, *is not left for our*  
*sins to we who sin voluntarily*; that is, a second host, because it behooved  
 Christ to suffer only one. Nor is a second baptism left to us; but a second  
 penitence is, and a third, and another besides, as John Chrysostom says on

<sup>28</sup>. *Paraenesis ad Theodorum lapsum* 1.6 (PG 47.284).

<sup>29</sup>. *Ap. David* 7.38 (CSEL 32/2.323).



this passage:<sup>30</sup> ‘It must be known’, he says, ‘that some arise here, taking away penitence because of these words, as if a sinner is not able, a second, a third, or more times, to rise up again after a fall through penitence. But he does not exclude penitence in this, nor an atonement that is done often through penitence, but a second baptism and host is.’

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30. *In Hebr.*, hom. 20.1 (PG 63.143).