

Corporal Penance in Belief and Practice: Medieval Monastic Precedents and Their Reception by the New and Reformed Religious Orders of the Sixteenth Century

Hannah G. McClain

In the sixteenth century, the Catholic Church witnessed the proliferation of new and reformed religious orders. While the priorities of these orders frequently overlapped with the agenda of the Catholic Reformation, they also reflected concerns that were unique to the monastic tradition and to the sociopolitical conditions of sixteenth-century Europe. Many new orders embraced an active apostolate that incorporated clerical and confraternal duties, while reformed orders situated this apostolic ideal within the tradition of monastic reform that emphasized strict adherence to primitive monastic rules.¹

A matter of central importance for religious orders throughout history has been the attainment of spiritual health; indeed, the unique forms of monastic life are specifically tailored to the achievement of this goal. A particularly potent and widespread method available to nuns and monks in their pursuit of spiritual health is the practice of corporal penance, also known as bodily mortification or penitential self-discipline. Corporal penance is valuable because of the direct but antagonistic relationship that is believed to exist between the human body and spirit, a relationship in which spiritual excellence can only be achieved when the desires and tendencies of the body are subjected to discipline. However, a marked decrease in the use of such penance by the religious orders of the sixteenth century has often been noted in discussions of early modern monasticism, even though this decrease is not representative of all religious orders and was consciously resisted by some prominent monastic reformers.²

Michael Mullett advances the view most commonly held by historians when he explains that, in comparison to previous orders, the Jesuits significantly reduced and sometimes eliminated penitential practices from their routine beginning with their inception as a society. Mullett goes on to argue that because of the prominence of the Jesuits in the sixteenth century and their status as a model for future orders, this change in the practice of penance signifies a shift that permanently altered monastic ideals.³ Similarly broad statements are made about the decline of penance among the Theatines and other new religious orders

¹ Michael A. Mullett, *The Catholic Reformation* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 69-110.

² *Ibid.*, 92-100.

³ *Ibid.*, 74, 92.

Corporal Penance in Belief and Practice

by William Hudon and Mark Lewis, who suggest that this decline was a response by nuns and monks to the changing nature of monasticism in the sixteenth century.⁴ H. Outram Evennett even argues that a general circumscription of asceticism was a fundamental component of Counter-Reformation spirituality.⁵ For Evennett, this spirituality was thoroughly pragmatic in its attempt to internalize the process of self-discipline by emphasizing the structured spiritual meditations made popular by the late medieval style of reflective piety called the *devotio moderna* rather than external mortifications, since internalized self-discipline was seemingly more amenable to an active apostolate than external self-discipline could be, with its associated costs in energy and stamina.⁶ Clearly, the reduction of corporal penance by sixteenth-century orders is the trend most often identified by historians of early modern monasticism.

The following discussion will offer a new explanation of how and why this tempering of corporal penance occurred, while also complicating the broad claims made by the authors above by analyzing the positions taken by those religious orders that continued to practice penance regularly and strenuously in the sixteenth century. Indeed, it is surprising that any reduction of corporal penance took place in monastic communities at the beginning of the early modern period at all, for a high degree of continuity is evident in theological ideas about the body and corporal penance between the medieval period and the sixteenth century. The best explanations for this shift in the practice of penance cannot, therefore, be purely theological. Rather, the fact that corporal penance, considered such a powerful and traditional means of achieving spiritual health, would be reduced or given up by many sixteenth-century religious orders is a testament to the nature of the new orders of clerks regular, the role of monastic founders and reformers, and the institutional obligations of religious orders within the Catholic Church.

New and reformed religious orders in context

⁴ William V. Hudon, "Introduction," in *Theatine Spirituality: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. William V. Hudon (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 50-1, and Mark A. Lewis, "Recovering the Apostolic Way of Life: The New Clerks Regular of the Sixteenth Century," in *Early Modern Catholicism: Essays in Honour of John W. O'Malley, S.J.*, ed. Kathleen M. Comerford and Hilmar M. Pabel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 285-6.

⁵ H. Outram Evennett, "Counter-Reformation Spirituality," in *The Counter-Reformation: The Essential Readings*, ed. David M. Luebke (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 55-63.

Before the question of monastic penance can be discussed, the new and reformed religious orders of the sixteenth century must be understood from within the context of contemporary Catholicism and its elaborate agenda of reform. It is first necessary to mention that the Catholic Reformation of the sixteenth century was not solely a response to Protestantism. Rather, much like the reform movements of the medieval period, the Catholic Reformation sought to restore the Church to its original, or primitive, state. Specifically, the sixteenth-century Reformation emphasized the correction of abuses that had troubled the Church for centuries and the establishment of new procedures to improve the Church's vitality and efficacy.⁷ These changes were formally enacted by the Council of Trent, which convened in several sessions between 1545 and 1563. The Council attempted, for example, to improve the morality and education of priests, to hold bishops responsible for their dioceses, and to exert greater control over religious orders.⁸ Against this backdrop, a number of new orders developed and flourished in the first half of the sixteenth century.

Many of these orders belonged to the new category of monastic organization referred to as orders of clerks regular. These religious men participated in the Church's attempt to reform the clergy by giving priests the opportunity to perform their pastoral duties within a community that embraced the higher moral standards usually attributed to monks. Orders of clerks regular also incorporated the charitable priorities of lay confraternities. Confraternities were popular in Italy at the time, and the majority of the new religious orders that developed in the Italian peninsula were rooted in this thriving confraternal tradition. The Oratory of Divine Love was an especially influential confraternity that established a presence in a number of Italian towns. Like other confraternities, the Oratory was a community of laypeople who engaged in devotional and charitable activities without taking solemn vows or adopting the communal lifestyle of religious orders. While confraternities undoubtedly provided an outlet for the spiritual aspirations of laypeople, they were also made necessary by the social and political conditions of sixteenth-century Italy, which were dominated by warfare, famine, and infectious disease.⁹ Such widespread misery led to a demand for the charitable services that confraternities could provide. Many

⁷ Mullett, *The Catholic Reformation*, 1-8.

⁸ Nelson H. Minnich, "The Last Two Councils of the Catholic Reformation: The Influence of Lateran V on Trent," in *Early Modern Catholicism: Essays in Honour of John W. O'Malley*, S.J., ed. Kathleen M. Comerford and Hilmar M. Pabel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 3-16.

⁹ Lewis, "Recovering the Apostolic Way," 280-93.

Corporal Penance in Belief and Practice

confraternities engaged in healthcare activities for the benefit of diverse members of society, and the Oratory of Divine Love was notable for its commitment to work in hospitals of *incurabili*, or those suffering from syphilis.¹⁰

The Theatines, established in 1524 as the first order of clerks regular, were founded by active members of the Oratory of Divine Love. Thus, the Theatines had an attachment to the types of charitable work undertaken by confraternities and were engaged, particularly in their early years, in social work ranging from hospital service to preaching. A further commitment to strict poverty and asceticism characterized the order, although Gian Pietro Carafa (later Pope Paul IV) is often accused of subverting these ideals with his concern for ecclesiastical politics.¹¹

A female religious community with similar spiritual and charitable goals was soon formed in the town of Brescia around a woman named Angela Merici; these women referred to their community as the Company of Saint Ursula. Merici had strong links to the Oratory of Divine Love and many of the women who joined her community were involved in charitable work in the Brescian Hospital for Incurables.¹² Although the Ursulines were gradually transformed into a religious order of enclosed nuns, they engaged in a diverse and active apostolate in the mid-sixteenth century. For example, Carlo Borromeo, the archbishop of Milan, was informed in 1566 that, "all the hospitals and all the schools of Christian doctrine for girls (in Brescia) are staffed by the Ursulines."¹³

Unlike the previously described orders, the Society of Jesus was not originally an Italian product. The founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius of Loyola, was a minor Spanish noble who underwent a spiritual transformation after a brief military career that ended because of a serious leg injury. After several failed attempts to settle permanently in Jerusalem, Loyola found himself at the center of a small community of men in Paris where he was pursuing an education. This incipient Society of Jesus transferred to Italy and received papal recognition in 1540, by which time the Jesuits were growing rapidly and engaging in charitable activities similar to those of other orders of clerks regular, including hospital work and dramatic acts of service during plague outbreaks. The

¹⁰ Ibid., 282.

¹¹ Kenneth J. Jorgensen, S.J., "The Theatines," in *Religious Orders of the Catholic Reformation: In Honor of John C. Olin on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Richard L. DeMolen (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), 1-19.

¹² Charmarie J. Blaisdell, "Angela Merici and the Ursulines," in *Religious Orders of the Catholic Reformation: In Honor of John C. Olin on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Richard L. DeMolen (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), 99-111.

¹³ Ibid., 111.

Jesuits also devoted themselves to the papacy and increasingly focused their apostolate on missionary and educational activities.¹⁴

A rather different tone is evident in the religious orders that were reformed in the sixteenth century, since they are situated within what Diarmaid MacCulloch calls, “the constant urge to renewal in Western monastic life.”¹⁵ While these reformed orders emphasized a more active apostolate like the new orders of clerks regular, they cannot be separated from the medieval tradition of monastic reform. Much like the Observant movement of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, these reformed orders emphasized a return to the monastic ideals of poverty, chastity, obedience, and strict adherence to their primitive rules.¹⁶ In the sixteenth century, the impetus of reform was also specifically linked to the Catholic response to Protestantism and the perceived laxity and secularism of existing orders.¹⁷ It is within this milieu, then, that reformed orders like the Discalced Carmelites and the Capuchins emerged in the sixteenth century.

The Discalced Carmelites are well known primarily because of their formidable founder, Teresa of Ávila. Teresa was deeply dissatisfied with what she perceived to be the frivolity, superficial spirituality, and lack of strict enclosure that characterized her Carmelite convent in the Spanish town of Ávila, so she set about reforming her own convent and many others throughout Spain. These new Discalced Carmelite convents were characterized by poverty, austerity, and constant prayer. Although enclosure was strictly enforced in accordance with the monastic tradition of eremitism and the confinement of nuns, Teresa insisted that intercessory prayer was a legitimate and effective way to participate in the Catholic Church’s counter-offensive against Protestantism.¹⁸ The Capuchins, on the other hand, were a reformed branch of the Franciscan Observants, already known as the most ambitious and faithful followers of Saint Francis’ ideal. Nevertheless, the Capuchins strove for an even more literal observance of the Rule of Saint Francis by living as hermits

¹⁴ John W. O’Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 23-36.

¹⁵ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 363.

¹⁶ James Mixson, “Observant Reform’s Conceptual Frameworks between Principle and Practice,” in *A Companion to Observant Reform in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond*, ed. James Mixson and Bert Roest (Boston: Brill, 2015), 60-1.

¹⁷ Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 210, 224-30.

¹⁸ Jodi Bilinkoff, “Teresa of Jesus and Carmelite Reform,” in *Religious Orders of the Catholic Reformation: In Honor of John C. Olin on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Richard L. DeMolen (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), 165-75.

Corporal Penance in Belief and Practice

and reviving the tradition of begging and extreme poverty. At the same time, the Capuchins also engaged in an active apostolate that included the administration of hospitals and preaching.¹⁹ According to Elisabeth Gleason, the Capuchins successfully “resolved the problem of harmonizing the contemplative life with the apostolic life.”²⁰

Penance in the medieval monastic tradition

In order to better understand the instances of change and continuity that occurred within these religious orders in regard to the practice of corporal penance, it is necessary to briefly trace the history of this type of monastic penance before the sixteenth century. Beginning with the founders of Christian monasticism in the third and fourth centuries, namely the Desert Fathers of Egypt and Syria, it is evident that corporal penance was an integral feature of the ascetic impulse that inspired these early monastics.²¹ C.H. Lawrence defines asceticism as “the renunciation of...the ordinary pleasures and comforts of life, in order to discipline the senses and free the mind for supernatural contemplation.”²² Corporal penance, then, can be seen as the aspect of asceticism that deals directly with the physical body, which is viewed in overwhelmingly negative terms throughout monastic history. A striking example of this view can be found in the words of Saint Bernard, the twelfth-century Cistercian abbot of Clairvaux, who provides a telling description of the body when advising that the monk not turn to “the dunghill of his wretched body, but to the heart where Christ indwells.”²³ Elsewhere, Bernard speaks of “the heaviness of the flesh which weighs down and oppresses the spirit.”²⁴ Bernard makes explicit the idea that the body is an obstacle to the attainment of spiritual health and unity with God because of its base, mundane, and sinful nature. At the same time, the body becomes a tool for achieving spiritual health when it is subjected to mortification.

¹⁹ Elisabeth G. Gleason, “The Capuchin Order in the Sixteenth Century,” in *Religious Orders of the Catholic Reformation: In Honor of John C. Olin on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Richard L. DeMolen (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), 31-45.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

²¹ C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 1-6.

²² *Ibid.*, 2.

²³ Saint Bernard, quoted in Jean Leclercq, *Aspects of Monasticism* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1978), 256.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 253.

It seems clear that this view of the body and penance had already developed among early Egyptian hermits like Saint Anthony, who engaged in sleep deprivations, fasts, and other self-inflicted mortifications. Interestingly, the early impulse towards bodily mortification may have also been inspired by the impossibility of martyrdom after Emperor Constantine's embrace of Christianity in the fourth century.²⁵ For example, when referring to the fourth-century Saint Martin of Tours, Sulpicius Severus wrote, "to fast, to keep unceasing vigil, to lacerate the flesh, this also is a martyrdom."²⁶ Without the option of spiritual heroism provided by martyrdom in its traditional sense, the monk could make a martyr of himself through penance. It has been noted that extreme feats of mortification took on a competitive and even aggressive tone beginning with the Desert Fathers.²⁷ For this reason, as the cenobitical form of monastic life grew and eventually overshadowed the solitude of the hermits, monastic founders like Saint Basil of Caesarea attempted to regulate penance by requiring monks to obtain permission from their abbot before engaging in extreme mortifications. These regulations were primarily intended to curb the pride and competitiveness that could be produced by such feats, since vanity and competition had no place in communities of humble, obedient monks.²⁸

Nevertheless, this type of regulation generally applied to only the most extreme forms of mortification, and it is clear from the long history of ascetic heroes that the drive to perform penitential feats was not dampened by the likes of Saint Basil. Extremity aside, mortification remained an acceptable and often required feature of monastic life. In the sixth-century Rule of Saint Benedict, which was to influence medieval monasticism so deeply through its sponsorship by the Carolingian dynasty, Benedict writes, "Renounce yourself to follow Christ. Punish your body, do not embrace pleasure, love fasting."²⁹ It would be difficult to overemphasize the significance of this simple directive, since the Rule of Saint Benedict was adopted by most religious orders during the medieval period. The Cluniacs, for example, who became the dominant force of Western monasticism in the tenth and eleventh centuries, sought to strictly observe Benedict's Rule.³⁰ Also during the eleventh century, a

²⁵ Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 2-3.

²⁶ Sulpicius Severus, quoted in Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 3.

²⁷ Lowrie J. Daly, *Benedictine Monasticism: Its Formation and Development through the Twelfth Century* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1965), 36.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 43-4.

²⁹ Saint Benedict, Abbot of Monte Cassino, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. and trans. Bruce L. Venarde (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 33.

³⁰ Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 83.

Corporal Penance in Belief and Practice

time in which proponents of the Gregorian Reform were urging a return to the primitive Church, ascetically minded individuals in Italy attempted their own return to the primitive monasticism of the Desert hermits. These new orders of hermits valued bodily mortification in addition to eremitism, with many of these orders embracing extreme penitential feats.³¹ Saint Peter Damian, for example, engaged in “ceaseless macerations and... ferocious denunciations of the flesh,”³² demonstrating the proclivity for self-flagellation that characterized his fellow hermits at Fonte Avellana.

The Cistercian order, whose abbot Bernard has already been mentioned, came to dominate the monastic scene at the turn of the twelfth century. Like the Cluniacs before them, the Cistercians observed Benedict’s Rule, emphasizing those aspects of the Rule that called for poverty and separation from the world. Although the typical Cistercian did not engage in the types of penance common to the hermits of the previous century, Saint Bernard himself, whose example and memory informed the Cistercian ideal, engaged in extreme mortifications, especially fasting.³³ In his analysis of the saint’s conception of penance, Jacques Leclercq concludes that, for Bernard, “mortification of the flesh leads to radiance of the spirit. We do not even have two successive phases here. They coexist, they alternate or mingle, to the point that the absence of one can prevent the grasping of the other.”³⁴ This concept of the immediate, simultaneous, but inverse implications for the body and spirit during penance was perhaps the strongest case for the practice of penance itself and was frequently invoked by those who promoted mortifications of every kind.

In the thirteenth century, the Franciscans, Dominicans, and other mendicant orders drastically altered the accepted forms of monastic life. These friars insisted on a more thorough embrace of poverty by refusing endowments, eschewing money, and living day-to-day by begging. Such radical poverty was an aspect of the mendicant friars’ new conception of the apostolic life, which they perceived as being properly directed outward, in pastoral service to the laity and with the humility that only the lifestyle of a beggar could provide.³⁵ Frequently, this extreme poverty necessarily led to bodily mortifications, such as sleeping on bare boards and traveling completely barefoot. Thus, even though poverty, rather than penance, was the guiding principle of the mendicant orders, its

³¹ *Ibid.*, 149-2.

³² *Ibid.*, 151.

³³ *Ibid.*, 172-81.

³⁴ Leclercq, *Aspects of Monasticism*, 264.

³⁵ Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 238-41.

practical implications obscured the boundary between poverty and corporal penance. The many permutations of the mendicant orders that developed during the late medieval period, such as the Conventual, Spiritual, and Observant Franciscans, participated in this poverty/penance ideal to varying degrees.³⁶

Evidently, corporal penance was generally embraced by religious orders before the sixteenth century. On occasions when this penance was subject to regulation, such as in Saint Basil's Rule, only extreme penitential feats were restricted and in some cases, these restrictions could be lifted with the permission of an abbot. Furthermore, a standardized regimen of penance was usually recommended, if not required, even by those orders that restricted extreme feats. Although the mendicant orders explicitly prioritized poverty rather than penance, most of these orders continued to practice standardized penance in addition to accepting the bodily mortifications that were implied by radical poverty. Even in the sixteenth century, nuns and monks who did not engage in corporal penance could be subject to accusations of laxity.³⁷

Penance in the new and reformed religious orders of the sixteenth century

The literature on early modern monasticism emphasizes the changes, rather than continuities, that occurred in the practice of corporal penance in the sixteenth century. Michael Mullett and William Hudon argue that the Jesuits and Theatines not only reduced their own members' participation in penance in comparison to medieval orders, but also served as a model for other, smaller orders that eventually reduced or eliminated corporal penance from their routine.³⁸ While Mullett and Hudon suggest that this reduction of penance was primarily the result of the more active apostolate undertaken by religious orders in the sixteenth century, H. Outram Evennett argues that this limiting of corporal penance was at least partially caused by the internalization of self-discipline that had become increasingly popular through the use of structured meditation and prayer manuals.³⁹ Regardless of the explanatory mechanism, all of the authors above agree that the tempering of corporal penance was essentially pragmatic, in that it made way for the pursuit of other spiritual goals like increased charitable activity or more

³⁶ Thaddeus MacVicar, *The Franciscan Spirituals and the Capuchin Reform*, ed. Charles McCarron (New York: The Franciscan Institute, 1986), 84.

³⁷ Hudon, "Introduction," 38-9.

³⁸ Mullett, *The Catholic Reformation*, 74 and 92, and Hudon, "Introduction," 17 and 50-1.

³⁹ Evennett, "Counter-Reformation Spirituality," 55-63.

Corporal Penance in Belief and Practice

meaningful prayer. It should be noted, however, that these authors fail to discuss the difficulties that arose when actual participation in corporal penance was reduced in the absence of any shift in the theological ideas that affirmed the primary importance of such penance. Furthermore, those religious orders that actively resisted this shift in penance and continued to practice it enthusiastically in the sixteenth century are generally overlooked. The following discussion will attempt to remedy this oversight by considering the position held by religious orders that maintained the medieval tradition of corporal penance and will also offer new explanations for the tempering of penance that did occur in many sixteenth-century orders.

Aside from their popularity and large membership, the Jesuits provide a suitable starting point for this discussion because their founder, Loyola, elaborated on penance at length. To begin, it is notable that Loyola retained the view of the body that had been common to medieval orders. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, a widely used devotional text containing meditative instructions to be given to participants during spiritual retreats, Loyola's references to the body as a sinful, putrid mass are reminiscent of Saint Bernard's descriptions (see page 8).⁴⁰ Undoubtedly drawing on his experience of caring for sick bodies, especially those of plague victims, Loyola writes, "I will look at all the corruption and foulness of my body...I will look upon myself as a sore or abscess from which have issued such great sins and iniquities and such foul poison."⁴¹ Building on this traditional conception of the body, then, Loyola proceeds to define the practice that he refers to as exterior penance. This exterior penance is the product of interior penance (or contrition) and can manifest itself in three ways: fasting, sleep deprivation, and mortifications that cause immediate pain like self-flagellation.⁴² Loyola affirms the value of exterior penance, explaining that it is efficacious "First, to satisfy for one's past sins. Second, to overcome ourselves; that is, to keep our bodily nature obedient to reason and all our bodily faculties subject to the higher. Third, to seek and obtain some grace or gift...such as interior contrition."⁴³

Interspersed throughout these thoroughly traditional ideas about the body and penance, however, are numerous notes and qualifications. After describing each category of penance and before proceeding to the

⁴⁰ O'Malley, *The First Jesuits*, 37-8.

⁴¹ Ignatius of Loyola, "The Spiritual Exercises," in *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. and trans. George E. Ganss, S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 139.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 143-4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 144.

next, Loyola admonishes “that we do not weaken our constitution or bring on noteworthy illness.”⁴⁴ For example, mortifications like scourging should inflict pain but not penetrate the skin. Furthermore, immediately after affirming the value of sleep deprivations, Loyola makes the seemingly contradictory suggestion that the individual should not, in fact, sleep less than is ordinary or healthy.⁴⁵ Indeed, Loyola’s directives regarding exterior penance can appear confused and indecisive, and this ambiguity is only partially resolved when Loyola concludes that “for some persons more penance is suitable, and for others less...[God] often enables each of us to know what is right for her or him.”⁴⁶

Loyola’s evident concern for the health of those undergoing exterior penance is not, of course, the product of any sympathetic ideas about the value of the human body or physical health itself. Rather, Loyola’s tempering of exterior penance is directly related to the attainment of other spiritual and apostolic goals that are prioritized above penance, in practice if not in theory. In his introduction to the first week of *The Spiritual Exercises*, Loyola claims, “Human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of this to save their souls...Consequently, on my own part I ought not to seek health rather than sickness...I ought to desire and elect only the thing which is more conducive to the end for which I am created.”⁴⁷ Therefore, while not pursuing physical health for its own sake, Loyola’s tempering of exterior penance can be seen as a product of the assumption that, in most cases, the individual can better serve God and work towards salvation in a condition of physical strength and good health.⁴⁸ For Loyola and the Jesuits, this assumption was integrally connected to the active apostolate undertaken by sixteenth-century religious orders, an apostolate that required monks and some nuns to pursue not only their own salvation but also the salvation of the laity through charitable service, preaching, and missionary activity.⁴⁹

The Theatines took a remarkably similar approach to the reduction of penance. Although one of the order’s best-known founders, Gaetano of Thiene, seems to have encouraged penitential self-discipline,

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 145.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁸ Ignatius of Loyola, “Constitutions of the Society of Jesus,” in *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. George E. Ganss, S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 292.

⁴⁹ John W. O’Malley, “Was Ignatius Loyola a Church Reformer? How to Look at Early Modern Catholicism,” in *The Counter-Reformation: The Essential Readings*, ed. David M. Luebke (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 70-2.

Corporal Penance in Belief and Practice

the second-generation Theatine Lorenzo Scupoli set the agenda for the practice of penance in his text, *The Spiritual Combat*. In the very first paragraph of the first chapter, Scupoli introduces his discussion of penance, claiming that bodily mortifications are, “without doubt, the most powerful means to acquire the spirit for those who use them well and discretely.”⁵⁰ According to Scupoli, those who use mortifications well are few in number since it is difficult to mortify the body without growing spiritually prideful. Scupoli further explains that mortifications should be pursued only slowly and gradually, implying that physical penance is the domain of older, more experienced monastics rather than the average nun or monk.⁵¹

Although Scupoli is primarily concerned with tempering penance in order to discourage pride, it seems that his ideas combined with the apostolic ideal of the Theatines to produce a practical concern for physical health that mirrors that of the Jesuits. In his Rule for the Theatines, Gian Pietro Carafa provides a concise defense of this apostolic ideal: “The whole religious life serves charity...[and] charity was commended by Christ and the Apostles in such a way that if it be absent, as I said, everything is in vain, and if it be present everything is complete.”⁵² With Carafa’s emphasis on charity and Scupoli’s relegation of physical mortification to the realm of monastic specialists, it is evident that actual instances of penitential self-discipline were reduced among the Theatines.⁵³

These foundational Jesuit and Theatine texts shed light on the issue of corporal penance not only through their content but also through their structure. As seen above, Loyola and Scupoli are careful to praise corporal penance and affirm its value before introducing any qualifications relating to its usage. It would seem that both men anticipate a backlash to their proposed tempering of penance, leading them to eagerly affirm traditional beliefs about the body and corporal penance before suggesting ways in which the reduction of such penance need not necessarily contradict these beliefs. The approach taken by these authors suggests that religious orders could not reduce or eliminate penance without expecting to be challenged. Such challenges could come from other religious orders or from within the conscience of the Jesuit or Theatine himself. For example, Hudon concludes that Scupoli’s tendency

⁵⁰ Lorenzo Scupoli, “Il combattimento spirituale,” in *Theatine Spirituality: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. William V. Hudon (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 114.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 114-5, 165-6.

⁵² Gian Pietro Carafa, “Rule of Carafa,” in *Theatine Spirituality: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. William V. Hudon (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 70.

⁵³ Lewis, “Recovering the Apostolic Way,” 285-6.

to abruptly shift from statements that praise corporal penance to statements that caution against it are evidence of “an ambivalence and lack of surety on his part.”⁵⁴ The same could certainly be argued of Loyola, whose ambiguity regarding the practice of penance has already been mentioned. Thus, while it is clear that the Jesuits and the Theatines were conscious of the difficulties that could arise from their reduced participation in corporal penance, it is less clear whether their attempts to rectify medieval beliefs about the value of penance with its marginalization in practice were entirely satisfying, either to other religious orders or to their own members.

The practice of penance also experienced a decline in women’s religious orders of the sixteenth century. The early Ursulines, for example, embraced Angela Merici’s predilection for fasts, vigils, and the wearing of coarse, uncomfortable garments called hair shirts. Interestingly, the eventual tempering of such penance does not seem to have been a product of the active apostolate practiced by the Ursulines. In fact, the Ursulines engaged in penance most strenuously in their early years, while they were also participating in demanding charitable works like the administration of hospitals. As the Ursulines were gradually prompted to move towards enclosure, usually by external, male authorities, their use of penitential self-discipline declined accordingly. Specifically, when Carlo Borromeo began to assert control over the Ursulines in the mid-to-late sixteenth century, he altered the simple rule originally dictated by Merici (who could not write) and removed the portions that prescribed fasts and vigils.⁵⁵ Beyond the desire to exert male ecclesiastical authority over religious communities of women, Borromeo’s move may reflect a concern for the perceived link between mysticism and asceticism. Holy women (and men) had always presented a unique challenge for Church authorities, since their visions, spiritual teachings, and mortifications could garner fame even if they were entirely unorthodox.⁵⁶ Thus, it seems likely that in eliminating the more dramatic aspects of Ursuline asceticism, namely corporal penance, Borromeo was also attempting to curb the associated risks of female mysticism.

In spite of the apparent predominance of religious orders that tempered or eliminated corporal penance in the sixteenth century, other orders not only continued to practice penance but also consciously opposed its decline. Teresa of Ávila, founder of the Discalced Carmelites, belongs to this latter category. Although Teresa never challenged Church

⁵⁴ Hudon, “Introduction,” 51.

⁵⁵ Blaisdell, “Angela Merici and the Ursulines,” 101-18.

⁵⁶ Leclercq, *Aspects of Monasticism*, 263-5 and Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender*, 229-30.

Corporal Penance in Belief and Practice

authorities directly, her writings, which were generally written for other Carmelite nuns, reflect an awareness and disapproval of the contemporary tendency to reduce penance. Teresa had also personally witnessed this reduction in her own convent at Ávila before she initiated its reform, and she goes as far as to remark sarcastically, “No one need be afraid of our committing excesses here, by any chance – for as soon as we do any penances our confessors begin to fear that we shall kill ourselves with them. We are so horrified at our own possible excesses – if only we were as conscientious about everything else!”⁵⁷ It should be noted that Teresa places partial responsibility for the reduction of penance among Carmelite nuns on the influence of their confessors, who were apparently excessively concerned for the nuns’ health. Later in the same work, however, Teresa insists that it is the devil himself who instills the idea that the nun must preserve her health in order to better observe her order’s Rule.⁵⁸ Rather than being a simple product of laxity, then, Teresa identifies other causes for the reduction of penance among Carmelite nuns, from seemingly benign interactions during confession to demonic influences.

Unsurprisingly, and in accordance with the medieval monastic tradition, Teresa argues for the consistent practice of penance because of the direct but inverse connection that she believes to exist between physical health and spiritual health – “(While) the body grows robust...the soul becomes so enfeebled that if we could see it we should think it was at the point of death.”⁵⁹ Teresa also participates in the long tradition (both monastic and lay) of venerating penitential heroes. Fray Peter of Alcántara was a personal acquaintance of Teresa’s and she praised his extreme and well-known mortifications, including startling sleep deprivations and nearly constant fasting that made him appear “to be made of nothing but roots of trees.”⁶⁰ To the best of her ability, then, it was the nun’s task to emulate these mortifications within the convent. While Teresa softens her penitential imperatives regarding “taking the discipline” and wearing hair shirts when addressing nuns who are ill, she

⁵⁷ Teresa of Ávila, “Way of Perfection,” in *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus Volume II*, ed. and trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946), 44.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Teresa of Ávila, “Conceptions of the Love of God,” in *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus Volume II*, ed. and trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946), 370.

⁶⁰ Teresa of Ávila, “The Life of the Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus,” in *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus Volume I*, ed. and trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946), 177.

nevertheless recommends that these nuns not postpone penance for long but begin to practice it again as soon as they are able.⁶¹

One can hardly fail to notice that, unlike the previously discussed orders, Teresa and the Discalced Carmelites were strictly enclosed nuns who did not have the opportunity to engage in an active apostolate as it was commonly understood at the time. This seems to suggest that Teresa's promotion of physical penance may have been linked to the fact that, unlike the new orders of clerks regular, the Discalced Carmelites did not need to maintain a high degree of physical strength because they did not engage in physically demanding activities. The following assumption, then, is that if the Discalced Carmelites had been engaged in a physically demanding apostolate, such an apostolate would have taken priority over the regular and strenuous practice of penance. While it is impossible to completely rule out this connection, Teresa certainly did not recognize such a link and the activities of other reformed orders confirm that an active apostolate did not necessarily result in the reduction or elimination of penance.

It has already been shown that the Ursulines practiced corporal penance consistently, even while they engaged in an active apostolate. The Capuchins are an even more striking example, as they are often lauded for achieving a balance of seemingly incompatible monastic ideals. As the ambitious inheritors of the Franciscan tradition, they embraced poverty and lived as hermits, but also devoted themselves to an active apostolate. Like the new orders of clerks regular, the Capuchins worked in hospitals, ministered in prisons, and adapted their charitable activities to the needs of society.⁶² While this combination of eremitism and an increasingly active apostolate impressed their contemporaries, the Capuchins also enthusiastically engaged in corporal penance, which was required by the order's 1536 Constitution.⁶³ On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, as well as every day of Holy Week, the Capuchins submitted to mandatory communal scourging. The Constitution of the Capuchins further stipulates the manner in which this penance should be performed: "While scourging themselves, the friars with a devout heart should think of sweet Jesus, the Son of God, bound to a pillar, and should make an effort to feel a small part of His most distressing pain."⁶⁴ Far from replacing corporal penance, then, the structured meditation described by Evennett as a hallmark of Counter-Reformation spirituality was

⁶¹ Teresa of Ávila, "Conceptions," 370.

⁶² MacVicar, *The Franciscan Spirituals*, 88.

⁶³ Gleason, "The Capuchin Order," 42-3.

⁶⁴ "Constitution of the Capuchins," quoted in Gleason, "The Capuchin Order," 43-4.

Corporal Penance in Belief and Practice

thoroughly integrated into the Capuchins' penitential activities. Although the Capuchins were unusually zealous in their agenda, their example nevertheless demonstrates that participation in an active apostolate did not necessarily require the reduction of corporal penance or the internalization of penance more generally.

Mullett, Hudon, and Evennett are correct in arguing that the practice of corporal penance experienced a decline in many sixteenth-century orders and that this decline was related to increased apostolic activity and the prioritization of internal methods of self-discipline. However, it has been shown that structured meditation was not necessarily opposed to external mortifications, and that neither charitable activity nor enclosure were reliable predictors of participation in corporal penance. At the same time, it is evident that there was a remarkable degree of continuity with the medieval period in the theological conceptions of the body and penance even among those orders that seriously reduced penance in the sixteenth century, so the solution to the present problem cannot be primarily theological. The preceding discussion has already suggested several other explanatory options. The Ursulines appear to be the most straightforward case, as their penitential and charitable ideals were subverted by external male authorities who sought to control the Ursulines' public activities and spirituality. Although other actors were certainly at work in this process, including several mother-generals succeeding Angela Merici who consciously altered the character of the Ursulines, it is nevertheless possible to trace the final elimination of penance to the intervention of Carlo Borromeo.⁶⁵

It is more difficult to account for the other orders included in this discussion, but it should be evident that in general, new religious orders were more likely to reduce or eliminate penance than reformed orders. Furthermore, since the large majority of new orders were orders of clerks regular, it seems likely that the nature of this new form of monastic life influenced the practice of penance. Not only did orders of clerks regular incorporate clerical and confraternal duties into the monastic life, but, as new orders, they also lacked a monastic history of their own. In other words, while they may have modeled their orders' rules on medieval precedents, they had no primitive rule of their own prescribing penance to either observe strictly or modify. Therefore, while engagement in charitable and pastoral duties alone may not have been a sufficient cause for the reduction of penance, the situation of these duties within new religious orders that lacked a penitential monastic tradition may very well have led to a reprioritization of activities in which charitable works

⁶⁵ Blaisdell, "Angela Merici and the Ursulines," 111-8.

were favored over penitential self-discipline. This explanation is incomplete, for it must be remembered that the early clerks regular were often active in confraternities that had penitential traditions of their own, but as a partial explanation it remains plausible and valuable, particularly since it can be expanded to imply that reformed orders were much more likely to prioritize penance (in both theory *and* practice) because they sought strict adherence to primitive rules that usually prescribed such penance explicitly.

A second explanatory option can be found in the role of monastic founders and reformers. Ignatius of Loyola and Teresa of Ávila are particularly notable because it seems that their treatment of corporal penance stemmed from their personal experiences of illness and mortification. During Loyola's period of spiritual transformation that followed his wounding in battle, he engaged in such extreme fasting and self-flagellation that he was seriously weakened; it was only through the encouragement of his confessor and extensive meditation on spiritual texts that Loyola abandoned these feats and decided that he would be of more use "helping souls" if he was physically strong and healthy.⁶⁶ While Mullett rightly concludes that this strategic attitude towards the reduction of corporal penance came to characterize the Jesuits, he neglects to mention the uneasiness with which this attitude was sometimes held, even by Loyola himself. Indeed, it would have been strange if the Jesuits had not felt the tension inherent in the process of reducing their participation in a practice that had retained its full spiritual value. Because of this tension, Loyola found it necessary to praise corporal penance at length in the very passages in which he tentatively excuses his fellow Jesuits from practicing such penance.⁶⁷

Like the younger Loyola, Teresa also engaged in voluntary bodily mortifications, but her most formative experiences occurred involuntarily. As a young woman, Teresa suffered from fainting fits that led to lengthy periods of paralysis. During one of these periods, Teresa admits, "I resolved to seek a cure from heavenly doctors, for, though I bore my sickness with great joy, I nonetheless desired to be well again...I believed that I should serve God much better if I recovered my health. That is the mistake we make."⁶⁸ After regaining her mobility and strength, Teresa felt ashamed of the desire for physical health that had given priority to her own will rather than to God's, and she denounced

⁶⁶ Mullett, *The Catholic Reformation*, 80-1.

⁶⁷ Loyola, "Spiritual Exercises," 144-5.

⁶⁸ Teresa of Ávila, "The Life," 34.

Corporal Penance in Belief and Practice

relaxations of corporal penance accordingly.⁶⁹ Therefore, Loyola and Teresa came to opposite conclusions about the value of physical health from their personal experiences, leading them to prescribe very different attitudes towards penance for their orders, whose members conformed their participation in penance accordingly.

Finally, an explanation may be found in the positions held by new and reformed religious orders within the larger structure of sixteenth-century Catholicism. In the preceding discussion, it was shown that the Jesuits, Theatines, and other new orders of clerks regular took a strategic view towards physical health, and it was suggested that such a view served these orders' own agenda that centered upon an active apostolate. However, this suggestion does not account for the fact that these new orders did not only attempt to fulfill their own apostolic goals, but also to place themselves at the Pope's service, through official statements or additional monastic vows that guaranteed submission to the Bishop of Rome.⁷⁰ Thus, these new orders demonstrated a great deal of flexibility in their apostolic ministries so as to be of better service to the papacy and, by extension, the Catholic Church at large. In the concluding section of *The Spiritual Exercises*, Loyola even claims, "What I see as white, I will believe to be black if the hierarchical Church thus determines it."⁷¹ Presumably, reduced participation in a spiritually beneficial practice like corporal penance could be justified by the pressing needs of the Church and its members.

Reformed religious orders, on the other hand, were located within a long monastic tradition. Throughout the medieval period, monasticism had established itself as a kind of parallel spiritual authority to the hierarchical Church, even though religious orders fell under the Church's jurisdiction and required its approval for their very existence.⁷² Nevertheless, even in the sixteenth century, long-established orders maintained a greater degree of independence from the Church hierarchy and had the freedom to prioritize their own agendas as a result of their imposing history and reputation for high spiritual standards. Although the Capuchins attempted to simultaneously prioritize their own goals as mendicant friars and the goals of the hierarchical Church, their ambitious program seems to have been the exception rather than the rule in the sixteenth century. While never simply ignoring the agenda of the Catholic Reformation or the needs of the laity, most reformed orders nevertheless

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Mullett, *The Catholic Reformation*, 70.

⁷¹ Loyola, "Spiritual Exercises," 213.

⁷² Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 282-93.

maintained a certain distance from the affairs of the world, which allowed them to benefit from those traditional monastic practices (including corporal penance) that were the lifeblood of the nun or monk's pursuit of spiritual health.

Conclusion

The face of sixteenth-century Catholicism was altered not only by the Counter-Reformation but also by the development of new and reformed religious orders. While many new orders were deeply influenced by Italian confraternities and the Church's desire to reform the priesthood, reformed orders sought to return to a more authentic form of monastic life. Both new and reformed orders embraced an active apostolate, and female orders that were restricted from this direct engagement with the world nevertheless attempted to act on the Church's behalf, even if only through prayer. However, there is a noticeable divide between those orders that tempered or eliminated corporal penance from their routines and those that continued to practice penance in the sixteenth century. The orders that consciously reduced penance were usually new orders of clerks regular that represented a break with the medieval tradition that had accorded penitential self-discipline a central role in the monastic life. This shift in practice is surprising because it does not seem to have been accompanied by a corresponding shift in theological ideas about the value of the body or penance itself. While it is possible that, in certain circumstances, enclosure encouraged penance while charitable activity and meditative practices discouraged penance, these explanations are incomplete. Rather, the practice of penance depended more directly on the monastic tradition (or lack thereof) possessed by religious orders, the role of monastic founders and reformers in promoting or restricting penance, and the institutional obligations of various orders within the larger structure of Catholicism.

Hannah G. McClain is an MA student in the University of Arizona's Department of History and the Division for Late Medieval and Reformation Studies. She received her BA at the University of Arizona in Sociology with honors. Her current research interests include late medieval and early modern religious orders, the Irish diaspora, and global Catholicism.

Corporal Penance in Belief and Practice

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Benedict, Saint, Abbot of Monte Cassino. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, edited and translated by Bruce L. Venarde. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Carafa, Gian Pietro. "Rule of Carafa." In *Theatine Spirituality: Selected Writings*, edited and translated by William V. Hudon, 67-70. New York: Paulist Press, 1996.

Loyola, Ignatius. "Constitutions of the Society of Jesus." In *Ignatius Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, edited and translated by George E. Ganss, S.J., 283-321. New York: Paulist Press, 1991.

—— "The Spiritual Exercises." In *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, edited and translated by George E. Ganss, S.J., 121-214. New York: Paulist Press, 1991.

Scupoli, Lorenzo. "Il combattimento spirituale." In *Theatine Spirituality: Selected Writings*, edited and translated by William V. Hudon, 112-209. New York: Paulist Press, 1996.

Teresa of Avila, Saint. "Book Called Way of Perfection." In *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus Volume II*, edited and translated by E. Allison Peers, 1-186. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946.

—— "Conceptions of the Love of God." In *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus Volume II*, edited and translated by E. Allison Peers, 357-99. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946.

—— "The Life of the Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus." In *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus Volume I*, edited and translated by E. Allison Peers, 1-298. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946.

Secondary Sources

Bilinkoff, Jodi. "Teresa of Jesus and Carmelite Reform." In *Religious Orders of the Catholic Reformation: In Honor of John C. Olin on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, edited by Richard L. DeMolen, 165-86. New York: Fordham University Press, 1994.

- Blaisdell, Charmarie J. "Angela Merici and the Ursulines." In *Religious Orders of the Catholic Reformation: In Honor of John C. Olin on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, edited by Richard L. DeMolen, 99-136. New York: Fordham University Press, 1994.
- Daly, Lowrie J. *Benedictine Monasticism: Its Formation and Development through the Twelfth Century*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1965.
- Evennett, H. Outram. "Counter-Reformation Spirituality." In *The Counter-Reformation: The Essential Readings*, edited by David M. Luebke, 47-63. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999.
- Gleason, Elisabeth G. "The Capuchin Order in the Sixteenth Century." In *Religious Orders of the Catholic Reformation: In Honor of John C. Olin on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, edited by Richard L. DeMolen, 31-57. New York: Fordham University Press, 1994.
- Hudon, William V. "Introduction." In *Theatine Spirituality: Selected Writings*, edited by William V. Hudon. 1-65. New York: Paulist Press, 1996.
- Jorgensen, Kenneth J. "The Theatines." In *Religious Orders of the Catholic Reformation: In Honor of John C. Olin on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, edited by Richard L. DeMolen, 1-22. New York: Fordham University Press, 1994.
- Lawrence, C.H. *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*. London: Pearson Education Limited, 2001.
- Leclercq, Jean. *Aspects of Monasticism*. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1978.
- Lewis, Mark A. "Recovering the Apostolic Way of Life: The New Clerks Regular of the Sixteenth Century." In *Early Modern Catholicism: Essays in Honour of John W. O'Malley, S.J.*, edited by Kathleen M. Comerford and Hilmar M. Pabel, 280-96. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.
- MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*. London: Penguin Books, 2011.

Corporal Penance in Belief and Practice

MacVicar, Thaddeus. *The Franciscan Spirituals and the Capuchin Reform*, edited by Charles McCarron. New York: The Franciscan Institute, 1986.

Minnich, Nelson H. "The Last Two Councils of the Catholic Reformation: The Influence of Lateran V on Trent." In *Early Modern Catholicism: Essays in Honour of John W. O'Malley, S.J.*, edited by Kathleen M. Comerford and Hilmar M. Pabel, 3-25. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.

Mixson, James, and Bert Roest. *A Companion to Observant Reform in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond*. Boston: Brill, 2015.

Mullett, Michael A. *The Catholic Reformation*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

O'Malley, John W. *The First Jesuits*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

—— "Was Ignatius Loyola a Church Reformer? How to Look at Early Modern Catholicism." In *The Counter-Reformation: The Essential Readings*, edited by David M. Luebke, 65-82. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

Wiesner-Hanks, Merry E. *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.