

Strategies for solving internal conflicts in early Christianity

1. INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Conflicts were a central element in the construction of the identity of ancient Christianity. Potentially destructive, they also proved to be factors of cohesion, reconstruction and reunification. As socioanthropological analysis has shown, conflicts, rather than being part of a pathology of social bodies, seem to be elements in a physiological dynamics of interrelation between different groups competing for particular resources. Through a series of conflicts which are also powerful cognitive factors, the groups achieve a better knowledge of their own role and nature – that is, of their own social identity.

The history of ancient Christianity is no exception. As is well exemplified by the central role of conflict in the preaching and action of Jesus himself,¹ the dimension of conflict seems to be written into its very genetic code. Without calling for a full ‘conflictual history’ of Christianity, comparable to a Gender History or a *Kriminalgeschichte*, we may affirm that this perspective, with its corollary of the strategies adopted to relieve tension, if not to resolve the causes of conflicts, has the undoubted advantage, in this field which is so delicate, so subject to ideological prejudice and the traps of controversialism, of providing a dynamic point of view which gives a more accurate account of the complexity of the historical realities.

This is true whichever phase in its history one considers: the phase of the so-called beginnings, when the various communities founded by Paul or attested by the various proto-Christian writings gradually detached themselves from the Judaic matrix; the transitional phase – roughly between 135 and 180 – when, mainly as a result of the prevalence of a hierarchical, vertical structure centred on the monoepiscopate which was to lead to the formation of what contemporaries described as the ‘Great Church’, a real Christian religion emerges; or the phase, during the third century, when that model of Christianity and the church emerged which, once it had passed through the crucible of the great persecution, was to dominate the religious history of late antiquity.

Whatever modern concept of conflict one decides to adopt, it is clear that conflicts were a central element in these different phases – intrareligious and interreligious conflicts with the Judaic matrix; external conflicts with the pagan world, its intellectual representatives and its state powers; and internal conflicts, the most characteristic kind of conflict, which permeated the history of ancient Christianity, and to which we must now turn our attention. Their central importance, and conversely, the central importance of the attempted solutions that we are going to examine, derive from the crucial part played, even in the most abstract doctrinal conflicts, by the communitarian component. The intracommunitarian and intraecclesial conflicts over the management of the different kinds of power and resources – material and especially symbolic and spiritual resources – brought the Christian communities into competition with each other and within themselves. They

¹ Cf. Guy G. Stroumsa, *Le radicalisme religieux du premier christianisme: contexte et implications*, in *Les retours aux Ecritures. Fondamentalismes présents et passés*, ed. E. Patlagean and A. Le Boulluec, Peeters, Louvain-Paris 1993, pp. 357-91; Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce, *The Central Role of Conflict in Jesus’ Preaching and Actions*, forthcoming; I am grateful to the authors for making it available to me.

were therefore an important chapter in the formation and maintenance of that ecclesiastical structure which had first to survive the violent clash with the pagan world and later impose itself as a state religion.

The religious community in question was *sui generis*, a community which soon chose as its form of self-representation that of being a community of ‘pilgrims’, a community ‘between two worlds’, simultaneously radical and reformed, ‘which transcends the limits imposed by nationhood, sex and social position, and at the same time reconstructs these barriers with the hierarchical authority of the ecclesiastical offices;’² a sociological form which, by virtue of its particular degree of tension towards the surrounding world, even when the initial eschatological waiting is over, still fed on this self-representation to configure in an original manner – a manner different from that of other ancient religious communities – its theological heritage, its practices, its relationship with the dominant forms of imperial culture, and, lastly, the very modes of concrete formation of the intracommunitarian relations between the clerical leadership and the population of the believers.

With a few laudable exceptions, the textbooks and the histories of Christianity and the ancient churches tend to see the so-called ‘Constantinian turning point’ as a crucial turning point for the particular problem that concerns us, too. According to this view, the ending of the persecutions and the incorporation of Christianity into the structure of the empire led to an increase in conflict. It is no coincidence, according to this theory, that the most significant internal conflicts in the Christian churches during the fourth century on the doctrinal and theological level such as Arianism and on the ecclesiological level such as Donatism and the Melitian schism, occur during that delicate phase of transition, the first two decades of the fourth century, which were to lead to the triumph of Constantine and to his increasingly pro-Christian policies. As one authoritative scholar has stated recently, ‘At the beginning of the fourth century the Church did not have much experience in the solution of these conflicts; pre-Constantinian times, for understandable reasons, did not favour litigious spirits’.³ This assertion is not acceptable, for, as we have seen, conflict, in its most diverse manifestations, accompanies the history of the Christian communities from the very beginning. Certainly, the turning point favoured the emergence of tensions and conflictual situations which the harsh years of persecution had helped to keep in the background; and probably the new situation in which the Christian churches found themselves, by lowering the conflictual temperature on the front of the external enemy, actually raised it on the internal front. However, apart from the fact that the sources available to us do not enable us to make really reliable comparisons, the examples of internal conflictual situations available for the preceding period are sufficiently numerous for us to be able to affirm that the conflictual fever – however one interprets it, whether as a physiological phenomenon which eventually favoured the rise of the ecclesiastical organism or as a pathological virus which was to leave a trail of outcasts and defeated people behind it – was a constant feature of the preceding phase too.

We must therefore now turn our attention towards the conflicts connected with the struggle for control of the Christian community and towards the main strategies adopted for solving them, strategies which were in the end to prove victorious.

² Christoph Marksches, *In cammino tra due mondi*, Milan 2003, p. 204.

³ Cf. Ewa Wipszycka, *Storia della Chiesa nella tarda antichità*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan 2000, p. 130

2. THE MAIN TYPES OF CONFLICT

The conflicts that characterized the life of the ancient Christian communities were of various kinds: intercommunitarian and intracommunitarian; symmetrical – that is, between analogous groups – and asymmetrical – that is, between groups differing in levels of power or in nature or even between a group and an ecclesiastical hierarchy or an individual; between bishops and the laity and between ecclesiastical hierarchs and new pressure and power groups such as the monastic orders; and conflicts essentially arising from one cause or, as more frequently happened, from a multiplicity of causes.

Conflicts between communities began at an early stage. As the first letter of Clement shows, by the end of the first century of our era it already seems to have become customary, in the case of disputes within a community, for a neighbouring community, or a particularly important one, such as that of Rome, to be called upon or feel obliged to intervene in the dispute, so as to contribute with its authoritative opinion to the solution of the problem. Later, during the course of the second century, in parallel with the formation of a hierarchical and centralized structure, under the influence of forms of political assembly that were widespread throughout the empire, recourse began to be made to synodal forms as attempts at a solution, a practice which was to become a constant in the later history of the Christian churches. Significantly, the earliest evidence dates from the end of the second century in connection on the one hand with the Montanist question and on the other with the controversy on the date of Easter. From that time on, synods, in different forms and with varying specific weights – provincial, national, etc – became part of the life of the Christian churches as organs responsible for regulating the internal life of the communities and finding a solution, at least on the level of norms, to the various kinds of controversy that afflicted their lives. However, as is shown in the fourth and fifth centuries by the Donatist question, their resolute power should not be overestimated, for the possibility of ensuring that the decisions taken were applied and respected was largely dependent on the persuasive skills and rhetorical power of the bishops and, in the case of radical conflict, on the coercive power of the state.

This tool proved incapable, however, of solving the virulent doctrinal and theological disputes that dominate the scene in the fourth and fifth centuries.⁴ The problem that this type of conflict raises is well known and there is no agreement between specialists about it. To what extent do theological conflicts such as Arianism really conceal motivations and causes of another kind? This is a problem that the student of religious conflicts is continually having to face, and it is made more acute in our case by the situation of late antiquity where it is hard to trace clear dividing lines between religious factors and political or social ones. But however this interlocking of factors is evaluated, I am convinced of the decisive part played by the ideological factor in a religion like Christianity which had made reflection on the nature of the divinity of Christ and on his relationship with God the Father a crucial element of communitarian identification. At any rate, in order to solve the problem, the ecclesiastical institution, from the first ecumenical council of Nicaea in 325

⁴ The subject is a well known and widely studied one (cf. for example Lorenzo Perrone, *La chiesa di Palestina e le controversie cristologiche. Dal concilio di Efeso (431) al II concilio di Costantinopoli (553)*, Paideia, Brescia 1980; Ramón Teja, *La "Tragedia" di Efeso (431): Herejia y poder en la Antigüedad Tardía*, Santander 1995; Silvia Acerbi, *Conflitti politico-ecclesiastici in Oriente nella tarda antichità: il II concilio di Efeso (449)*, Madrid 2001.

onwards, generally found itself obliged to put pressure on the current emperor to ensure that it be resolved, through his authority and his coercive power, in favour of what was by now known as the party of orthodoxy.

Another potential factor of conflict, a more specifically religious one, is that of the purity and integrity of the community, when it was threatened internally by enemies of various kinds. The problem of the purity of the community of the baptized, the *hagioi*, accompanies, with historical variations, the entire history of the pre-Constantinian Christian communities, and poses itself again in new terms after the mass conversions favoured by the Constantinian turning point. For a long time, serious sin was seen as a social sin through which the individual sinner threatened the integrity of the body of the faithful. The penitential system of late antiquity may be interpreted, in this perspective, as a typical strategy adopted by the hierarchy in order to control this dangerous kind of conflict.

As is shown by the case of the confessors against whom, in the mid-third century, Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, inveighs sternly in his letters and in his treatise on the unity of the church, accusing them of abusing the particular charisma conferred on them by their testimony before the court, which they exploit in order to challenge the supreme power of the bishop, thus threatening the unity and integrity of the Christian community, another classical 'topos' which generated serious conflict in the community was that of the control of the spirit, and more specifically of the relationship between informal and charismatic powers and formal powers, between free charismatic powers and the charisma of office linked with the exercise of episcopal authority.

What were the strategies adopted to deal with these conflicts? To answer this question I would now like to examine three concrete cases of general interest, which help to illustrate the complexity of the interaction between conflict and the construction of what was eventually to emerge as the 'orthodox' identity of the Christian community. These three cases have been chosen because they can provide a historically concrete basis for the construction of an ideal typology: a destructive 'solution', which implies a mortal antagonism with no possibility of compromise and which therefore pursues the aim of eliminating the internal enemy; in contrast, the search for an integrative solution, which makes it possible to reabsorb in the most painless way possible the cause of the conflict; and finally, as an intermediate way, the search for a compromise solution.

The first case is that of the conflict about the 'true church' which was carried on mainly in the second half of the second century between some communities of Christian Gnostics and Christian communities structured in the form of the monoepiscopate.

The second case is that of the intra-church conflicts which, with the elimination of alternative forms of the church and the affirmation of the so-called Great Church, were destined to become an endemic factor in the history of the church from the third century onwards.

The third case is that of the penitential system of late antiquity, which may be reinterpreted as the solution adopted by the post-Constantinian church to check an internal conflict which was endemic and in danger of getting out of control: that of sin as a social problem.

3. THE CONFLICT ABOUT THE 'TRUE' CHURCH.

With the exception of the Aerians, the followers of a certain priest called Aerio who is mentioned by Epiphanius, bishop of Salamina, in the late fourth century in his heresiological treatise *Panarion* or pharmacy against heresies, a group which criticized the monarchic episcopate at its roots,⁵ only the Christian Gnostics seem to have radically attacked that figure of the bishop and that structure of the monoepiscopate which is generally agreed to have been one of the crucial factors in the spread and eventual triumph of Christianity. In this sense, the conflict about the 'true' church, which in the second half of the second century opposed Christian Gnostics to Christians belonging to the Great Church, is a typical case of conflict with no possibility of mediation, a clash between two irreconcilable conceptions of the community. For our purposes it has several features of interest. Although the conception of the 'true' church defended by the Christian Gnostics was to be conclusively defeated in this conflict, mainly as a result of the 'ideological' weapons and organizational skills deployed by bishops such as Irenaeus, it was not to disappear, for, as the 'church of the spiritual', it was destined to reappear periodically throughout the history of the Christian heresies. Conversely, it was precisely through the struggle against this non-hierarchical and spiritual concept of community that the concept of the monoepiscopate was to take on certain definitive features, which would favour its reception and spread. Not least, it was through this conflict – which of course was not played out solely on the ecclesiological level, but affected the very nucleus of the Christian identity – that men like Irenaeus applied some crucial rhetorical strategies centring on a verbal power of definition of the 'truth' (and conversely of falsehood), which was to help forge a more general strategy for fighting the internal enemy.

How could a believer, at the end of the second century, distinguish the true Christians from the false ones, the true church from the false one? Christian Gnostics and Christians of the Great Church gave mutually irreconcilable answers. The former resorted to qualitative and elitist criteria, refusing to recognize the true church in the real and visible community, in its monotheistic conception, in its practices and its sacraments. They maintained that what distinguished the true church from the real community was not its relationship with the clergy, but the level of behaviour of its adherents and the quality of their reciprocal relationships. The *Apocalypse of Peter* declares that 'those who are from life... having been enlightened' (70,24-71,4), can of their own accord distinguish the true from the false. Being a part of 'the remnant...summoned to knowledge' (p. 71,20-21), they do not try to dominate others and do not submit to bishops and deacons, who are 'waterless channels'. They partake of the 'wisdom of the brotherhood that really exists... the spiritual fellowship with those united in communion' (p. 79, 1-4). Analogously, the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* states that what characterizes the true church is the union that its members enjoy with God and with one another, 'united in the friendship of friends forever, who neither know any hostility, nor evil, but who are united by my gnosis... (in) friendship with one another' (p. 67,32-68,9)⁶. The Gnostic author of the *Testimony of Truth*

⁵ Cf. Marksches, p. 186-7.

⁶ Cf. also the affirmation of the Montanist Tertullian: 'For the church in itself is properly and before all else spirit, in which there is the trinity of a single deity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit... The church unites where it is in the designs of the Lord – a spiritual church for spiritual people – not the church of a number of bishops', *De pudicitia*, 21.

adopts a similar argument (p. 73, 18ff.). He rejects as erroneous all the distinctive signs of ecclesiastical Christianity. Obedience to the clerical hierarchy demands of believers that they submit to 'blind guides', who derive their authority from the evil creator. Against this and similar lies only Gnosis is able to provide salvation, in that it permits direct access to Christ, bypassing the salvific mediation of the church. The true church, as is made clear in *Authoritative Teaching*, is not the visible church presided over by the bishops, but the invisible and spiritual one, which comprises all those who are spiritual (*Authoritative Teaching*, p. 32,30-32).

From the point of view of a Catholic bishop like Irenaeus, this Gnostic position was an outrage: 'these heretics challenged his right to define what he considered to be his own church; they had the audacity to debate whether or not catholic Christians participated; and they claimed that their own group formed the essential nucleus, the 'spiritual church'.⁷

There is no need to dwell further on this radical conflict. The Gnostics in question were the champions of an ecclesiological conception which threatened the Great Church at its base, challenging its doctrinal, ritual and hierarchical elements. The conflict did not admit of mediation. It would be a mistake, however, to stress merely its destructive dimension,⁸ which certainly existed, and which was applied by the episcopal hierarchy to solve this mortal conflict, because it also served to create a better awareness of what were to become, with the primacy of the bishop, the distinctive features of the church that emerged victorious from this conflict.

4 CASES OF INTRA-ECCLESIAL CONFLICT

The triumph of the monarchic episcopacy, that is, of a kind of church which was hierarchically structured and centred on the absolute power of the bishop, was really the outcome of a long process, or rather of a series of conflicts – starting with the conflict with the Christian Gnostics that we have been considering – which eventually gave the bishop wide-ranging powers in the governance of his community. Because, however, especially from the fourth century onwards, the osmosis between the life of the Christian community and city life increased, the bishops found themselves inheriting command over a fundamental part of public life, characteristic of the ancient cities, with its associated privileges. This helps to explain the increase in conflict. For the church 'fused to a surprising degree with the ancient city structures, absorbed the principles that governed them, inherited their passions, their little wars, their allies and their enemies.'⁹ This also helps to explain the fact that, as the proceedings of the councils and the synods indirectly confirm, disputes between bishops increased significantly. The bishops 'were capable of waging trivial wars against each other, which continued even at a later date: wars over the boundaries of a diocese, over income, over clerics moving from one diocese to another in defiance of the canons, and over the attitude adopted at the investiture of bishoprics which fell vacant.'¹⁰

⁷ E. Pagels, *I vangeli gnostici*, Mondadori, Milan 1981, p. 181.

⁸ Unfortunately, the available sources do not enable us to investigate as it deserves the aspect – a fundamental one for our subject – of the forms and the control of the coercive tools used to resolve the conflict with the Gnostic communities.

⁹ Wipszycka, p. 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

Already in the mid-third century the increasingly evident emergence of what was to become a veritable scourge in the next century had induced the clear-headed and far-sighted cleric Origen to reflect on possible strategies for coping with this situation. His homilies are so full of passages against the corruption of the clergy and the bishops that some have spoken of his anticlericalism, reading his condemnations as those of a disarmed and impotent prophet. What Origen actually proposes is a more complex and sophisticated strategy, which was to prove provident and triumphant. The bishops were by this time required to perform tasks which carried great responsibility, not merely in ecclesiastical but increasingly in civil terms. This made it even more imperative that they should be trained and chosen according to both religious and political criteria, in relation to those 'signs' that made it possible not only to identify the good shepherd of the Christian community but also the good ruler of the civic community. Origen often returns to these 'signs', to which the ecclesiastical authorities are urged to conform: the spirit of service, modesty, gentleness, calm, a lack of desire for wealth. This is in effect a charter of the good ecclesiastical functionary, which, if really put into practice, must show itself to be capable of solving, at least partly, all those situations of intra- and intercommunitarian microconflict which were nourished by the episcopal abuses that were being denounced in Carthage during those same years by Cyprian.

The need to establish a deontological code of the episcopal profession which could regulate, among other things, the thorny question of election, was to increase during the fourth century, which witnessed that growth and concentration of the bishop's powers which legitimizes for this period the use of the expression monarchic episcopate, and which witnessed at the same time an explosion of hitherto unknown conflictual violence in the election of the most important episcopal posts, as is shown by the dramatic events of the election of Pope Damasus. One only has to think of a new function which the bishops saw assigned to them: control over the monks, a far from easy task, which indeed was to prove a source of new conflicts. On the one hand the monks very quickly created groups for exerting pressure on the bishops, groups which were particularly active in the endemic doctrinal conflicts, where they aimed to induce the bishops to carry on a more active struggle against pagans, Jews and heretics; these were groups which treated with suspicion pastors opposed to violence and which, in any case, distinguished themselves frequently by their violence not only towards the buildings but also the people linked with paganism¹¹. On the other hand the problem of the obedience of the monks to the bishops became so endemic that the synods and councils repeatedly tried to regulate it, as is confirmed by canon 4 of the Council of Chalcedonia on the obedience owed by monks to their bishops. It is not possible here to go further into this problem, whose religious root is to be sought in the emergence, with monasticism, of alternative, charismatic forms of power. A well-known example is the strategy of domesticating charisma adopted by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in his *Life of Anthony*, where the great ascetic is never shown in conflict with the power of his bishop. The problem was to prove more complex and to vary considerably according to the different local situations.

¹¹ Cf. G. Fowden, *Bishops and Temples in the Eastern Roman Empire, A.D. 320-435*, in "Journal of Theological Studies", 29 (1978), pp. 53-78; W.H.C. Frend, *Monks and the End of Greco-Roman Paganism in Syria and Egypt*, in "Cristianesimo nella Storia", 11 (1990), pp. 469-84. For the well-known case of the lynching of the Neoplatonic philosopher Ipazia (Socrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 7, 13-15), cf. the discussion by Ph. Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian*, Oxford 1978, pp. 10-11.

Among the new powers acquired by the bishop, as leader of a Christian community, which increasingly coincided with a citizen community, is that of the *audientia episcopalis* as a means, and a traditional one, now used by the episcopal authority as an arbiter which could intervene and mediate in disputes among the faithful. But in reality the most significant power that the bishop came to exercise was that which we might anachronistically describe as commanding the ‘court of conscience’.

4. THE BISHOP AND THE PUBLIC CONTROL OF CONSCIENCES

It is no coincidence that the growth of the penitential institution runs parallel to the reinforcement of the monarchic episcopate, as is confirmed by the centralization of the power of confessing (‘binding and releasing’) and of the related control of the penitential machine on the part of the bishop. This penitential system – which flourished especially between the mid-fourth and the mid-fifth century, when the barbarian invasions and the irreversible crisis of the empire profoundly changed the situation – may be interpreted as a strategy adopted by the early church to solve a typical case of socio-religious conflict: conflict caused by deviance. The subject of the contention is serious offences, from adultery to homicide, which threaten the integrity of the Christian community. In a situation where there is as yet no internal forum mediated by the confessor, anyone who commits serious offences finds himself being responsible before the whole community, including the bishop. The offence that he has committed is primarily social rather than moral, and so requires public reparation.

Despite the transformations which occurred, the old penitential system preserved its primary aim: the reintegration of the sinner into the community. As a social disease, sin had to be treated and, if necessary, excised; only in the case of incurable conflicts, usually linked to complex doctrinal situations, did the sinner have to be definitively expelled, lest his guilt become a disease that was fatal to the whole community of believers. The strategy adopted, in other terms, was a typically ‘catholic’ one, which tended towards integration and not towards exclusion. In this perspective, the bishop found himself playing a decisive role: the role of therapist but also of judge, the role of doctor but also of surgeon, the role of benevolent controller but also of ruthless executor.

The social dangerousness of sin helps us understand an aspect of the penitential strategy which at first sight appears secondary but which in reality is crucial: its public dimension. To understand this we must bear in mind that penitence fell into three phases, which corresponded, in a sense, to the three typical phases of a rite of passage and which, on this symbolic level, significantly reproduced the ternary scheme of baptismal initiation. The first phase was that of the temporary excommunication of the penitent, a process which, by excluding him from eucharistic participation, separated him, albeit temporarily, from the centre of community life. This separation, however, was not total, since, throughout the regime, continual relations were maintained with this community, which functioned as a controller in the penitential conduct, thus confirming that the separation, however long and painful, was not definitive, but had a ‘medicinal’ function.

Like baptism, whose long preparation during this period usually began with a public declaration by the person who had decided to be baptized, entry into penitence

involved an initial act: the so-called *exhomologesis*¹² or confession to the bishop of the sin that had been committed. The confession of the sin was followed by entry into the order of the penitents¹³, which was analogous to the phase of the catechumenate.

This last parallel, between the condition of the neophytes and that of the penitents, reveals the clear aim of initiatic pedagogy in these penitential 'stations': an educative and at the same time purificatory process which was necessary 'both in order to free the sinner prudently and lastingly from his sin, preventing any relapse, and in order to safeguard as far as possible the purity of the community, avoiding any undeserved reintegration, and to ensure that the community itself does not fall into the same sins.'¹⁴

During this second period, which coincided with the actual penitence, and which, if successful, would conclude with reconciliation, i.e. with full readmission into the community of the faithful, the penitent was subject to a series of obligations, which comprised a series of mortifications (especially of the flesh), fasts, alms-giving or moral tests to teach him to control and repress in particular the temptations of the flesh, as well as liturgical obligations and lastly penitential ones, such as the practice of wearing, according to certain biblical models, a hair shirt, or a future ban on exercising those professions which had fostered his sin.

Now, a sin which had threatened the purity and integrity of the community demanded, for its atonement, the staging of a veritable performance of public humiliation – not a merely sacramental gesture, however powerful such gestures might be, but a kind of social indemnification. Examples of such performance are all those penitential acts which were performed in front of the united community. The community thus proved an indispensable actor in ensuring that, in the role play characteristic of the ritual process, the mortal miasma accumulated by the sinner would be gradually identified, purified, separated out, and finally eliminated, through the solemn public act of reconciliation¹⁵, a clear parallel of baptismal consecration.

In a passage of his *Ecclesiastical History*, Socrates narrates a celebrated episode: the suppression in Constantinople, under the episcopate of Nectarius (381-397), of the penitentiary priests (*tous epi tes metanoias presbuterous*), those, that is, who were responsible for helping the bishop of that metropolis to confess the penitents. The pretext was provided by a scandal that arose as a result of the fact that a young lady, in her zeal to confess the sins she had committed after baptism to the penitentiary, also confessed to him that she had been seduced by a deacon of the same church. Naturally the deacon was deposed, but that was not enough to placate the anger of the Christian *plebs*, which rioted, furious at the act itself, because it defamed and dishonoured the church as a whole. So in order to soothe their feelings the drastic decision was taken to abolish this institution, which was taken as a scapegoat. Commenting on this episode ten years later, Socrates quotes the words of Eudemon, the priest who told him about it, when he asked whether this decision had proved useful to the life of the church: 'God only knows. For my part, I see clearly that it has resulted in the fact that the faithful no longer accuse each other's sins' (H.E. V, 19; P.G. 67, 613 ff.).

This episode helps to bring more clearly into focus the complexity of the intra-communitarian conflict that was concealed behind the face of penitence: what,

¹² Cf. Tert. *Paen.* 9.V. J. Grotz, *Die Entwicklung des Bußstufenwesens in der vornicänischen Kirche*, Freiburg i. B., 1955, p. 137.

¹³ *Ordo paenitentium*; cf. Hier., ep. 72,2. On the decisions of the councils, cf. Poschmann, p. 806.

¹⁴ Karpp, XXV-XXVI.

¹⁵ On which see Vogel, pp. 40-41; Vorgrimler, p. 77.

exactly, did its 'public' dimension consist in? The priest Eudemon's reply to Socrates is a clear hint of a possible function which the community of the faithful performed during the process of penitence, a function analogous to that which it performed during the process of the training of a catechumen: that of ritual control. It was a complex, obscure process, of which the texts preserve only hints and allusions, and which on the theological level found a significant counterpart in excommunication, which, unlike the modern institution, did not entail the total exclusion of the body from the church, but only its temporary exclusion from eucharistic communion. In fact the penitent continued to participate in the life of the community, according to a shrewd gradation which, in a sacral perspective, might be interpreted as a progressive process of decontamination from the miasmas of sin and consequently a progressive approach to the centre of the sacred territory, the *sancta sanctorum* represented by the eucharistic consecration itself¹⁶. This participation, however, which is comparable to the situation in which the catechumens found themselves, entailed a sort of public control of their conduct, typical of the social relations which were being established in religious microcommunities.

In the sermons of Augustine there are various allusions which help us understand the complexity and delicacy of this control, this process of public therapy. Thus, in the face of a grave and socially dangerous sin such as adultery – whose penal consequences, by the way, were profoundly different in the case of the adulterer, who got off lightly, and in that of the adulteress, who risked capital punishment – the bishop of Hippo states that, although certain men commit adultery in the secrecy of their own homes, their wives often denounce them to the bishop, either because they are humanly moved by feelings of jealousy and vengefulness or because, more nobly, they are concerned for their husbands' eternal salvation (*Serm.* 82, 11). In another sermon, however, Augustine directly urges betrayed wives to tell their bishops about their husbands' adultery (*Serm.* 392, 4), thus indirectly confirming the practice of reciprocally revealing each other's sins which is one of the faces of the ritual control that was at work in the ancient system of public penitence. Besides, the insistence with which in their sermons Ambrose, Pacianus and Augustine – and we find the same thing later in the heartfelt and by now resigned observations of Caesarius of Arles, who was prepared, in the face of the almost irreparable cracks in the system, to accept forms of radical compromise – insist that their flock should not hide their serious sins, is a clear symptom, not only of the practical difficulties of reaching and discovering the recalcitrant sinner, but of the fact that this kind of public control presented various contradictions and difficulties. Imagined and constructed as a strategy for resolving the serious conflict represented by the increase of deviance as a result of the profound transformations which the Christian churches underwent from the mid-fourth century onwards, the rigid structure of public penitence, in what was by now a Christianized society, was to reveal all its limitations from the sixth century onwards, giving way to the new system of individual penitence.

CONCLUSIONS

¹⁶ Cf. Pac., *de paen.*, II, 3, who harshly criticizes those of the faithful who, if they too ashamed to report their sins to their brothers, are not ashamed to continue to approach with contaminated hands that altar *sanctis quoque et angelis metuendum*. It should not be forgotten that in those same years (386) in the East Chrysostom was to fix in his treatise on the priesthood the new sacrality assumed, together with the altar, by the priest as sole mediator of the sacred.

The adoption by the ecclesiastical hierarchy of various different strategies for resolving the different kinds of intra- and inter-communitarian conflict is an important and perhaps insufficiently explored chapter of the causes which favoured the triumph of Christianity. Sometimes these strategies coincided with the fact of the power of control and coercion which the bishops possessed in no small measure and which increased after the Constantinian turning point. But the church was also capable of using more subtle and persuasive strategies, as is shown by the case of public penitence, which, despite its harshness, aimed not at exclusion but at reintegration: a duality of strategies which was to prove a trump card in the long history of the Roman catholic church.