

THE RECONCILIATION  
OF PENITENTS:  
A MODERN ENACTMENT OF A  
MEDIEVAL RITE

A REPORT BY JOHN HARPER

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THE  
EXPERIENCE  
OF WORSHIP  
IN LATE MEDIEVAL  
CATHEDRAL AND  
PARISH CHURCH

# The Reconciliation of Penitents: a modern enactment of a medieval rite

A report by John Harper

As part of a series of meetings and discussions undertaken by an international group of scholars concerned with aspects of medieval liturgy, the rite of the Reconciliation of Penitents was enacted in the medieval church of St Teilo now located within the grounds of St Fagans: National History Museum Wales on 23 and 24 June 2010; and almost all of those taking part were people who are active in the study of aspects of liturgy.<sup>1</sup> This report sets out to provide a background to this enactment, to summarise its preparation and execution, and to review some of the outcomes and responses to the experience.

## Christian penitence

Every Christian is expected regularly to confess their faults and failings before God through an act of penitence, and thereafter receives God's forgiveness through absolution, generally pronounced by an ordained minister. The manner of penitence and forgiveness differs across the centuries and between one part of the Christian Church and another. Two forms are still common: a generalised and collective act of repentance and forgiveness by a whole congregation assembled for worship, and an individual act, most often involving one penitent and a priest. In the late Middle Ages individual confession and absolution of sins became prevalent, alongside general and collective repentance within the liturgy; however, there was a third form, which singled out specific individuals for penitence in public. The most extreme form of punishment for wrongdoing was excommunication from the Church, a power sometimes exercised by bishops (including popes) over princes and rulers in the ongoing struggles and tensions between Church and State. There was also a form of punishment which involved exclusion from the Church for a period of time, during which an individual could repent of their sins and then seek to be reconciled with the Church and absolved of their sins.

Such public acts of expulsion and reconciliation, initially reserved to a bishop and conducted in his cathedral, had by the late Middle Ages also been devolved to parish clergy and were conducted in the parish church. At the beginning of Mass on Ash Wednesday (the beginning of the penitential season of Lent), those identified for public penitence for their wrongdoing were ejected from the cathedral or parish church and excluded until such time as they were re-admitted. The earliest point for reconciliation and re-admission would be Maundy Thursday some six weeks after their expulsion; but in some cases exclusion continued for several years. During this time they could not attend services in the church or even enter the church. In the same way that wrongdoers were expelled on Ash Wednesday in the formal ritual of the Expulsion of Penitents, so too they were re-admitted in the ritual of the Reconciliation of Penitents on Maundy Thursday.

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<sup>1</sup> The enactments took place in the context of the final meeting of the International Research Network funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, *Interpreting Medieval Liturgy c. 500-1500: Text and Performance*. It also involved the core research team of the AHRC-ESRC Religion and Society programme research project, *The Experience of Worship in late medieval Cathedral and Parish Church*, and students from Bangor University's MA in Sacred Music Studies. The Precentor of Salisbury Cathedral presided at the liturgy.

## **The rite in outline**

On Maundy Thursday the penitents, expelled from the church on Ash Wednesday and excluded throughout Lent, were readmitted in a ceremony which took place between the Office of None and the principal Mass. Effectively it replaces the procession before Mass. Originally an episcopal rite conducted by the bishop in his cathedral, by the late Middle Ages the rite is found in parish books (notably the Manual, but also the Processional, Missal and Gradual) with provision for those occasions when the bishop is not present.

The rite consists of three principal sections: first, the clergy and singers meet the penitents at the west or other principal door of the church where they are re-admitted and led through the church with the singing of psalm 33 [34]; then the clergy and singers, having returned to the quire and presbytery, recite the Seven Penitential Psalms; finally, the presiding priest (or bishop) recites prayers and pronounces the absolution. As with so much medieval liturgy, the rite is dominated by psalms; indeed, the recitation of the seven penitential psalms takes up the greater part of the time (although it occupies no more than a few words of rubric in the liturgical books).

The rite is important as a liturgical act of public penance whose origins can be traced back at least as far as Rome and the middle of the first millennium. Within Holy Week it is significant as an occasion when clergy minister directly to the laity in the people's part of the church, indeed at the church's outer threshold – the principal door. The rite is found throughout the Western Church. While the rite was expurgated from the liturgy of the Church of England in 1549, forms of public penance in church and marketplace continued into the seventeenth century; the Reconciliation of Penitents continued to be a part of the Roman Catholic liturgy after the Tridentine reforms and there is evidence of its use in the nineteenth century, though of course private confession increasingly became the norm from the late Middle Ages onwards..

## **The background to a modern enactment of the rite**

On 23 and 24 June 2010 this rite was enacted at St Teilo's Church, now rebuilt and being decorated and furnished as it might have been c. 1520 at St Fagans National History Museum, a part of the National Museum of Wales. It was enacted in isolation, without None beforehand or Mass afterwards, and not within Holy Week, but at midsummer.

St Teilo's is a small parish church, originally located at Llandeilo Talybont – a crossing point over the River Loughar at the western extreme of Glamorgan. The building was constructed between the thirteenth and the fifteenth century, and consisted by the beginning of the sixteenth century of chancel, nave, modest north transept and substantial south aisle. It may have been a pilgrimage church on one of the routes to St David's. The interior of the church is about 56 feet (15 metres) long – not untypical of many rural Welsh parish churches of medieval origin surviving today, though the large south aisle is notable.

Although St Teilo's was part of the possessions of the Cistercian Abbey of Neath, it was a parish church within the Diocese of St Davids, and therefore followed the liturgical Use of Salisbury ('Sarum Use'), adopted by St Davids cathedral and diocese in the second half of the

thirteenth century. By the early sixteenth century it is possible that St Teilo's may have owned printed books of Salisbury Use, although older manuscript books may still have been available. In preparing the text for the enactment of the Reconciliation of Penitents, printed copies of the Manual, Processional, Missal and Gradual were consulted. The rite is unusual in appearing in all four books. Furthermore, there are discrepancies between the four books. While such discrepancies may seem a surprise in printed books (including those prepared by the same printer), especially to those used to the consistency of the Book of Common Prayer or the post-Tridentine Roman Catholic books, it must have been part of the normal pattern in medieval churches. Books of differing dates and provenance may have been acquired from different sources: in addition to printed books, one cannot rule out the possibility of redundant Cistercian books from Neath Abbey or from the adjoining diocese of Llandaff (or even further afield) migrating to St Teilo's.

A parish priest or clerk with access to more than one liturgical book must have had to choose which version of the rite was to be used. Musical discrepancies are most apparent. In the latter part of the rite, the point varies at which recitation 'sine nota' gives way to the normative versicle and response tone. Greater variance is found in the treatment of the opening. The key text to the opening sections comes from Psalm 33 [34], verse 11: 'Venite filii audite me: timorem Domini docebo vos.' (Come, my children, and listen to me, and I will teach you the fear of the Lord.) The officiant calls the penitents three times to enter the church, each time singing 'venite, venite, [venite]'. After the first two calls, his two assistants tell the penitents approaching the church to kneel and then rise. After the third call, the choir takes up the singing of the processional antiphon and the psalm. In the sources there is ambiguity about (a) whether the officiant sings 'venite' two or three times in each call, (b) if he does sing it three times, what the melody of the third 'venite' should be, (c) following the third call, at what point in the text the cantor and the choir take up the whole antiphon. Two readily available earlier manuscript sources related to the Use of Salisbury present the antiphon complete: a Gradual from the earlier 13<sup>th</sup> century (British Library, Add. MS 12194), and the Pontifical used by bishops of Bangor in north Wales (The Bangor Pontifical, early 14<sup>th</sup> century, unnumbered, but housed in Bangor University Archives and Special Collections). The Bangor Pontifical unambiguously directs that the antiphon is to be sung by the bishop in its entirety. Most likely the variants in the printed books demonstrate ways in which the earlier written text had been adapted in the performance of the antiphon: the officiant sang only the opening 'venite' (rather than the whole antiphon as originally expected), and only after the third call was the whole antiphon sung – completed by the choir rather than the officiant.

The variants<sup>2</sup> between Manual, Processional, Missal and Gradual raise questions about the relative authority of the books one to another, and the extent to which local variance was normative. In two respects at least variance in this rite was inevitable: spatial configuration and human resources. Some flexibility is acknowledged in the books with regard to human resources, since neither the bishop nor the archdeacons may have been present even in the cathedral church: the rubrics of the printed books allow for the senior priest present to officiate with the assistance of two deacons. However, what happened in a parish church where the parish curate may have been the only ordained minister? Did he perform the whole rite single-handed: or did his clerk and sexton assist in place of the deacons? During the singing of the opening psalm 33 [34], one of the choir is directed to lead the reconciled

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<sup>2</sup> Other variants include the text of the lesson read by the archdeacon (omitted when the bishop is not present), the psalm-tone for the processional psalm, the inclusion (or omission) of *Gloria Patri* from the processional psalm, the texts of the prayers, the endings of the prayers.

penitents one by one to the officiant. In a parish church this duty might have fallen to the parish clerk; but what happened when the parish clerk had to sing the psalm in the absence of a choir? Was the task of leading then delegated to the verger or sexton, to a churchwarden or a senior member of the congregation?

With regard to space, it is already apparent from the directions in the customaries for the old and new cathedrals at Salisbury that the rite was adapted to suit the building. At Old Sarum, the rite took place at the principal door of the church, which was on the south side; at the new cathedral the rite took place at the great west doors. At St Teilo (as at Old Sarum) there is a west door, but it is not the principal door; however, both cathedrals at Salisbury are several hundred feet in length, but St Teilo's is less than sixty feet long. In either cathedral, the singing of a psalm of 22 verses including the repetition of the antiphon after each verse allowed time for the re-admission of the penitents and the procession back to the quire. The procession back to the chancel of St Teilo's is less than a quarter of the distance: was the psalm abbreviated, was it sung much faster, or did everyone stand in the chancel after the procession until the psalm was completed?

### **Preparing text and directions for St Teilo's**

In reconciling the readings of the early printed books, priority was generally given to the readings of the Manual and Processional in the ceremony at the church door, and to the Missal and Gradual in the chancel. A more pragmatic solution was adopted with regard to the treatment of the officiant's calling of 'venite', and the singing of the choir antiphon. This ignored the readings of both Manual and Processional with regard to the calls, and of all four books with regard to the singing of the antiphon. The officiant's part followed the (unnotated) Missal: 'venite' was sung twice (rather than three times). Then, taking account of the readings of the complete antiphon in the manuscript Gradual and Pontifical, after the officiant's third call 'venite, venite', the cantor continued with the third 'venite' (with the melody found in the Manual and Gradual, but not the Processional) and the choir took up the antiphon at 'filii'. Again using Gradual and Pontifical as the model, the complete antiphon was sung complete after each verse of the psalm, beginning with three 'venites'. (It might be argued that the choir only sang from 'filii' in repeating the antiphon, though this abbreviates the psalm verse and omits the crucial imperative with which the verse begins.) The psalm was terminated when the procession had reached the chancel.

A medieval priest or clerk would have approached the texts and rubrics of this rite with a whole bank of normative liturgical conventions and practices. For the most part what the books include are the specifically prescribed and the exceptions to the norms (e.g. the inclusion or exclusion of standard texts like 'Gloria Patri', 'Dominus vobiscum', 'Oremus' etc). Approaching the rite as modern 'outsiders', many of the directions included in the service book for the enactment needed to set out directions specific to St Teilo's: in this respect, the original rubrics served primarily as editorial instructions to the compiler of the service book as to what to include or omit, and as general guides to movement and the use of the space.

Two particular instructions required specific interpretation. First, the penitential psalms are directed to be recited 'sine nota'.<sup>3</sup> Modern editors have interpreted this instruction

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<sup>3</sup> The absolution also has the rubric 'sine nota'.

differently: for instance, Nick Sandon (in his editions of *The Use of Salisbury*) translates the phrase as meaning ‘spoken’, while Charles Warren (in *The Sarum Missal in English*) translates it as ‘on a monotone’. A pragmatic decision with a group of singers unused to working together was to interpret this as ‘on a monotone’, removing issues of inflection, and retaining something of the stability of plainsong recitation: in the event, the low pitch of the monotone is very close to speech. The second issue was that of prostration – the position in which the penitential psalms are recited. The rubrics suggest that at least those who were in stalls with desks could not prostrate themselves on the floor, for when all rise during the absolution, they are directed either to kiss the floor or the desk (‘surgant omnes a prostratione osculantes terram vel formulas’). Medieval clergy (and at least some laity) would have recited the seven penitential psalms from memory whatever the posture; but anyone needing a book for the psalm texts could not be fully prostrate on the floor. Thus, the position adopted for the psalms and prayers was kneeling with head close to the floor (reminiscent of a Muslim position for prayer, and also a position adopted by the Carmelite nuns of Notting Hill<sup>4</sup>).

In the allocation of human resources, it was decided that the officiant would be assisted by two laymen in lieu of deacons, one taking the role of parish clerk (and acting as master of ceremonies), the other perhaps as sexton assisting the clerk, and a banner bearer (here an adult rather than the boy allocated this role at the Expulsion of Penitents on Ash Wednesday). There were four singers, probably the largest number to be comfortably accommodated in the chancel at St Teilo’s. While this may be too generous a resource for most rural parishes, it would certainly have been achievable in larger villages, small towns and larger urban parishes, as is apparent from some contemporary churchwardens’ accounts .

### **From text to performance**

At St Teilo’s all those participating in the chancel and the three penitents were practising Christians actively involved in church music and/or liturgy, and all were Anglicans except two of the four singers (who were Roman Catholics with some experience of Anglican choral practice). In the manner of the medieval clergy, singers and laity, collectively and individually, we each drew on our established bank of conventions and norms in movement, gesture and singing, modulated by the requirements (and unfamiliarity) of the rite and by the scale and disposition of the building. While there could have been weeks of immersion in medieval spirituality, theology, devotion and liturgical practice, as well as in issues of movement, gesture and singing, this was a task undertaken with only three hours of preparation over two days (indeed, only two hours on one day for the officiant).

Inevitably our backgrounds and experience conditioned the manner in which the rite was conducted: it was formal, measured, dignified, not over-fussy, indeed much as one might find today in an Anglican cathedral or ‘high’ parish church. In one sense that was ‘inauthentic’; and in reaction to the solemn, middle-class Anglicanism, the singers, as well as adopting some ‘English’ features of Latin pronunciation, opted at one stage for a more ‘vernacular’ accent (only moderating it because their concentration needed to be focused on reciting the Latin itself). In other ways, this was ‘authentic’, in that we were real people with an acquired repertory of conventions and norms applied to an unfamiliar liturgy (and even in the Middle Ages this was a rite only observed annually, and perhaps not every year in every parish church).

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<sup>4</sup> See their recent DVD, *No greater love* (Soda Pictures, 2010).

As well as what we brought to the liturgy from our own experience of church ritual, there was a measure of adaptation and intuitive interpretation, especially in the opening section where the ministers greeted the penitents and re-admitted them to the church. At the very opening it seemed fitting to lay out the officiant's cope on the altar, and for the two assistants to vest him in it before the procession to the door.<sup>5</sup> Reading the rite of the Expulsion of Penitents (where the church door is closed on them following their ejection) it seemed appropriate for the church door to be shut before the rite of Reconciliation began. The officiant is directed in the Use of Salisbury to stand at the west door facing north (i.e. not directly facing the penitents), and to make a gesture of invitation as he sings 'venite'.<sup>6</sup> In practice, the officiant (using the south door at St Teilo's) instinctively stood in the centre of the porch doorway to face the penitents (though this obscured some of the action from the congregation inside the church). The 'sexton' (the assistant acting as though the deacon with the penitents) felt it natural to use a hand gesture to halt the advance of the penitents when instructing them to kneel, as well as deciding to kneel with them; and, in response, the 'parish clerk' (the assistant taking the part of the officiant's deacon) used a hand gesture to direct the penitents to stand again.

With so few singers, it seemed sensible for the 'parish clerk' to lead the penitents one by one to the officiant, rather than a member of the choir as directed in the books. A series of intuitive gestures were introduced: the clerk bowed to the penitents before taking them by the right hand; the hands were held high (rather as in the Arnolfini marriage portrait); both bowed to the officiant, before the penitent's right hand was passed to the officiant's left hand; hands again were held high as the officiant led the penitent into the nave and bowed before returning to the door. None of this is scripted, but it seemed right – whether or not it owed more to the post-medieval reconstruction of the Use of Salisbury ritual in the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth century. This was a solemn occasion; and just as the penitents of medieval times may have been married at the church porch with the solemn joining of hands, so they were 're-married' to the Church by a series of solemn hand gestures. Other actions were conditioned by space and artefacts. For instance, the 'sackcloth' banner (using the pole and cross-piece of a modern Mothers' Union banner) seemed too long and wide, and had to be manoeuvred through the screen doorway. And there were compromises: unused to long periods of kneeling, those participating made use of carpet mats.<sup>7</sup>

### **Undertaking the rite**

There were four iterations of the rite. First, a 'dress' rehearsal in cassocks; then a full performance with a chosen congregation; on the following morning, a filmed performance with the chosen congregation; and finally a public iteration (in the event sparsely attended) again with cameras running. There were four principal groups in the rite: the officiant and his assistants; the singers; the singers; and the congregation. The 'congregation' at the first full performance and the first filmed performance consisted of members of the AHRC Medieval Liturgy Network, for the most part scholars of medieval liturgical texts (as were three of the

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<sup>5</sup> It was common practice for vestments associated with a particular altar to be kept there, rather than in a sacristy; however, the survival of cope chests suggests that these were stored together in a separate location.

<sup>6</sup> Warren translates 'signum' as the sign of the cross, but there seems to be no justification for this (*The Sarum Missal in English*, vol. 1, p.

<sup>7</sup> Payments for mats for the singers in the chancel are found in early 16<sup>th</sup>-century churchwardens' accounts; and both cathedral and church floors were commonly covered with straw, rushes, etc., according to season.

singers and one of the assistants). However, we were always clear that although a medieval rite was being enacted, it took place in the present. While it was informed by the medieval as far as possible, the experience had to be 'in the now'; and for those who were Christians, this was also an act of worship. There were, however, many features that raised questions about the medieval experience. For instance, three of those attending the public iteration had limitations to their mobility and could not possibly have knelt, let alone prostrated themselves: how did the aged and infirm behave in church in the Middle Ages? One of them had a coughing fit, and had to leave, to be followed by her husband: what would have happened in the past when so many more people may have been unfit in early spring?

The 'scholarly' congregation in the first two iterations was aware of the shape of the liturgy, and had already heard a paper about the rite of Expulsion of Penitents at Rouen Cathedral. Nevertheless, they did not have access to a full script before the event; however, for those who considered themselves to be 'literate', copies of the Seven Penitential Psalms (in Latin and English) were available, as also some devotional texts on penance and the Passion. The pictures on the church wall were also available for those who wished to contemplate them. But the typical focal points for devotion were veiled in natural linen, reflecting normative medieval practice during Lent and Passiontide. The images of the twelve apostles on the pulpitum were covered, as were the figures of the rood (the crucified Christ with the Blessed Virgin Mary and St John), the altar cross, and the figures of the patron saint (St Teilo) and the Virgin at the east end.

Each of those present had a different experience, in part affected by their individual role and location, as well as by their own approach. The ministers, singers and penitents enacted the rite four times, and each iteration revealed a different experience – including the inhibiting impact of filming. The chosen congregation attended two iterations. Their role is not defined in the liturgical books (as is typical). However, some were struck by the separation of men and women on the two sides of the church. While they were treated as 'themselves' in the first iteration, some were given specific status (if not roles or characters) in the second iteration. This encouraged different modes of behaviour: the high status lady ensured she had a good view of the re-admission of the penitents (even though she crossed into the 'male' part of the church) and conducted her own devotions focused on book and nave altar, almost ignoring the ministers and singers in the chancel; two low status women sat at the back, chattering and not engaging directly with the ritual.

Offering generic roles to the members of the congregation in the second iteration proved helpful in allowing them to engage more actively in the event: some mimicked the high status lady, others showed their distraction or wandered to look at the wall paintings, others were free to be genuinely prayerful. From the outset, scenarios had been prepared for the penitents based on serious misdemeanours listed in the 'Great Cursing'.<sup>8</sup> These scenarios enabled all present to construct an identity for each penitent, and to allow the penitents to enter a role rather than being vulnerable as individuals. Theft, child neglect and alcoholism had modern resonances; heresy seemed more remote from our experience. In practice, the rite had a considerable impact on each of the penitents as practising Christians, and this is discussed further below.

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<sup>8</sup> *Manuale et processionale ad usum insignis ecclesiae Eboracensis*, ed. W. G. Henderson, Surtees Society, 63 (1874), pp. 119-122. The scenarios are included here as an appendix.



For the ministers and singers, the roles, texts and actions were clearly delineated; their apparel (alb and amice, or cassock and surplice), while not specifically medieval in fabric or cut, was basically the same as that worn in the early sixteenth century. Each was familiar with the use (if not the full understanding) of Latin and of chant: the same may have been true of their medieval predecessors. But none of the ministers or singers was equipped with the medieval spiritual or devotional framework; nor were the penitents, who wore formal modern clothes (they had been asked to dress as though attending a funeral), but in the event chose to be barefoot. Although it would be ludicrous to claim that this was a medieval experience, it was possible to reflect on elements of the liturgical enactment in terms that went beyond text and understanding, and in particular to separate out some of our responses in relation to the senses.

Just as the spiritual and devotional aspects were constrained, so too was smell (taste had no part in this ritual). The reconstructed St Teilo's is clean and uncluttered. There was a faint aroma of incense, but not the imbued smell of its regular use absorbed in vestments and hangings; there were no tallow candles with their distinctive aroma of burning fat, no stale straw or rushes, and no rancid body odours of the unbathed. However, sight, physical feeling, hearing and the inter-sensory experience of place and the disposition of the people all played an important part.

### **The experience of the rite: senses, feelings and religious outcomes**

One of the striking visual moments for the penitents occurred at the very beginning of the first iteration. While in the rehearsal the assistants acting as the deacons had been dressed in black cassocks, when they appeared through the church door in white albs this had a considerable impact: their 'otherness' was emphasised (particularly since they were people the penitents knew quite well, but had never seen in this garb), and it was a reminder of the accounts of angels in white robes (e.g. the Resurrection narrative) and the iconography. At the same time, the bright external light meant they could not see the priest in the relative darkness of the church, so the initial call 'venite' came – disembodied – from the darkness. By contrast, the result of kneeling prostrate with face to the ground for much of the ritual within the church rendered sight largely irrelevant. Those in the sanctuary whose faces were close to the glazed tiles were sensitive to the rapid changes of light as the morning sun shone through the east window, or was obscured by cloud.

The limitation of visual stimulus was an entirely unfamiliar experience, and one which put greater emphasis on hearing and physical feeling – especially the discomfort, even pain, of kneeling in that one position for 25 minutes. For everyone, kneeling prostrate for over twenty minutes was a challenge, particularly after the first experience of what it felt like. However, not only did it raise questions about pain thresholds and control of posture for our medieval forebears, each iteration enabled individuals to discover ways of (a) finding the best physical position and weight distribution and (b) positive use of physical stillness that transcended discomfort. For the penitents the pain of kneeling proved cathartic. Unable to separate the rite from their own religious belief, each found the rite a spiritual experience, a genuine act of penitence, absolution and reconciliation. This was most vividly expressed by one penitent who likened the experience to that of her own earlier experience of giving birth, where the positive outcome more than justified the physical pain of the process.

The recitation of the penitential psalms and of the following prayers occupied the period of kneeling. During this long period, the absence of movement and the visual constraint of kneeling with face to the ground placed most of the remaining sensory experience on the aural. The recitation of over 120 verses of Latin psalmody at a low monotone pitch required intense concentration from the singers, but for all others present there was a stasis of time and place. Those familiar with the rite (or with rubrics for the recitation of the seven psalms in other rites) were taken aback by the length of time required to recite the psalms: a short rubric which occupied only a tiny portion of the text proved to dominate the time-span of the whole rite. As an experience, regardless of the meaning of the words and their religious implications, the stasis proved something that one learnt to pace with each iteration. Moreover, when the priest began the prayers, the aural contrast was notable. However, the prayers, like the psalms, were mostly sung on a single pitch, with minimal decoration. When the singers began the more elaborate plainsong melody of the Introit to the Mass, then the richness of the music was fully apparent; this was further enhanced by the improvised polyphonic rendering of the repeat of the antiphon. The combined impact of sound and sight – the singing of the Introit and the wall-paintings in the church – was particularly significant for one penitent when he stood up at the end of the ritual.

The intimacy of the chancel at St Teilo's was very evident, and the impact of movement and sound was amplified for those within the space. While the priest recited the versicles and the prayers there was a marked contrast aurally between the greater part of the recitation facing east and the two moments when the priest turned to the west towards the people: the greeting 'Dominus vobiscum' before the group of three prayers, and the pronouncement of the Absolution. Those outside the chancel were not so aware of this aural contrast, though anyone looking up from prayer in the nave was aware of the visual impact of the priest turning towards them.

For the penitents and those admitting them to the church, touch was important in the early part of the rite. Each penitent was taken by the hand by the assistant acting as deacon and then by the priest. Such physical contact was less familiar in the medieval church (certainly between ministers and people), except at moments of anointing, imposition of ashes, or matrimony. Even today the formality of the taking by the hand, and the passing of the hand from assistant to officiant brought a special reverence to the importance of touch. Eye contact was raised by two penitents, particularly in relation to this part of the rite: one felt that it was appropriate to keep her eyes lowered when met by the assistant (whom she knew), but that she had to make eye contact with the priest (whom she had only just met), in spite of the fact that her stance as penitent suggested head bowed.

### **Place, space and disposition of people**

Some of the most particular responses to the rite related to place, space and the disposition of each group. For both ministers and penitents (as the two key groups in the ritual) the awareness of thresholds was particularly strong: the thresholds of the church door and of the chancel screen. The penitents moved through four stages in crossing the threshold of the church door: the closed door; the regulated approach to the opened door; being led formally across the threshold into the church; and finally seeing the door closed again – but from a position within the church.

On admission to the church, one by one the penitents were formally conducted by the officiant to the west end of the nave. While one observer felt that the congregation should have welcomed them on their re-admission to the church, another felt that this was an important 'liminal' space that they occupied – re-admitted to the church, but not yet absolved of their sins. Only after the absolution did the penitents integrate with the rest of the community worshipping in the nave, joining with them fully for the Mass which was to follow. At this point too some commented on the absence of response from the congregation: there was no sign of welcome, nor expression of joy. Might a medieval community responded actively and positively, or would the solemnity of Maundy Thursday and the Triduum prevailed?

Whereas the crossing of the first threshold was controlled by the ministers, there was no such regulation at the entrance to the chancel. Although there was no door there, the barrier of the screen made the separation of the more sacred space between nave and chancel quite clear. The penitents knew they could not cross it. One penitent made the important observation that she felt that the singers and ministers in the chancel became surrogates for her: in reciting the penitential psalms and the prayers, they made the act of penitence on behalf of the penitents. The facts that (a) the ministers and singers had passed the second threshold, and penetrated further into the holy space, and (b) that they faced to the east, away from penitents and people in the nave (who also faced east) contributed to this feeling.

Within the chancel, the sense of enclosure and being set apart was strong. Ministers and singers faced eastward from the moment when they passed from the nave until the singing of the Introit to the Mass. In doing so they felt totally separated from those in the nave and were quite unaware of and detached from them; indeed the view was expressed that there was no certainty that there was anyone else present in the church. Issues of exclusion by gender cannot be ignored, and caused comment from some of the women present. The separation of men and women in the nave was unfamiliar to many, but the implication of the 'high status' woman choosing to cross to the male side of the church for a better view of the reception of the penitents was noted. The maleness of what was seen and heard in the east end of the church was notable (particularly with the statues of the Virgin Mary obscured by the Lent veils), and some of those women present who were singers were particularly conscious of their musical exclusion.

Modern liturgical practice, influenced by the Liturgical Movement, tends to emphasise inclusion through the use of space, posture and position, eye contact, physical participation and even touch. In undertaking a rite in which ministers and assistants were set apart by the chancel screen and faced eastward away from the people in the nave there was a reminder of former practice. For one of the penitents, this had a particularly powerful impact. Not only was there a strong feeling that the ministers and singers had taken on the burden of the act of penitence on her behalf during the rite, but after the event she found that her whole approach to the role of the priest in public worship had been challenged. She saw new importance in the typology of priesthood (rather than the individual as priest), and has reacted to some of the personal intervention typical of modern liturgical celebration. For a number of the Christians present, the rite emphasised a God held in awe – the God who is encountered on the mountaintop in the Old Testament (and in the Transfiguration narrative) as the counter pole to the loving God made man which has greater emphasis today.

### **Matters to which we were less attuned**

Only the small number of the museum's curatorial staff and their advisory group were fully aware of the impact of veiling the church. The obscuring of the painted frieze of apostles, the rood, the saints and the altar cross with natural linen was far more apparent to them than those participating in the ritual who had no opportunity to see the church (and especially the rood and the painted panels of the screen) unveiled.

Although the barrier of the chancel screen was strongly felt, we were less attuned to the rarity of ministers and singers coming through the screen, passing among the congregation and conducting a ritual at the church door. Processions before Mass or after Vespers on Sundays and feast days were familiar, but rituals at the church door or in the nave were largely confined to rites of passage: baptism at the font, marriage at the church door, the entry and departure of the coffin in the funeral rites.

Above all we lacked the larger contexts of the daily round of services (the original ritual took place between None and Mass) and the special rites of Holy Week: the inclusion of the Introit to the Mass is no more than an indication of what is to follow. Within the great liturgies of Holy Week and Easter, the Reconciliation of Penitents is a relatively modest ritual. However, by singling it out, we were able to explore not just the rite but to consider many more general questions about the performance and experience of medieval liturgy.

### **What we might have done differently**

Crucial to the experience was the use of Latin, yet in those texts where medieval familiarity could be assumed this was an obstacle. This was the case for the singers in the recitation of the penitential psalms, which medieval clergy (and some laity) would have used daily and recited with total familiarity from memory. The sheer bulk of Latin text to pronounce accurately largely dominated the singers' concentration; and while the ministers were familiar with the general meaning of the psalms (especially Psalms 50 [51] and 129 [130]), they could not engage verse by verse. It would have been valuable to explore the different impact of reciting the penitential psalms in English where familiarity of text and immediacy of understanding would be more readily available. Just as we instinctively drew on a familiar repertory of gesture and movement, even if it was not demonstrably 'medieval', so too the use of familiar language in certain circumstances may reflect something closer to the experience of medieval clergy.

### **The value of repeating the rite**

The ministers, singers and penitents enacted the rite four times: twice on the first day ('dress rehearsal' and first iteration), and twice on the second day (filmed and public iterations). At least for the penitents, the most 'meaningful' of these four enactments was the first iteration with congregation: they were sufficiently familiar with the ritual to know what to do and what to expect, and this enabled them to experience ritual as an act of penitence. The remaining two iterations felt far more like 'acting' for two of the penitents, and this was further emphasised by the presence of cameras and the pressure to get all the movements and gestures right. However, for the third penitent felt most at ease in the final iteration, when the full import of the ritual was most telling for her. Most of the ministers and singers were

familiar with daily repetition of a liturgy. Nevertheless, in repeating this ritual, the ministers discovered the encumbrance of book and text, and stronger reliance on physical memory of the actions and greater use of aural cues. The contrasts of the public iteration were particularly valuable in reminding us of the strictures facing those with limited mobility and of the realities of coughs and colds.

## **Conclusion**

The validity of undertaking this rite, whether as scholarly investigation, human experience, or act of worship, emerges in this account. Crucial matters regarding the relationship of texts, resources and location and the challenges of reconciling them to enactment have been addressed. However, where this piece of research goes further is in taking care to consider the experience of the rite for each group of participants, and indeed for each individual. No one pretended to have been transported to the late Middle Ages, but the great majority of those present (and there was at least one sceptic present) took away significant insights having experienced (rather than merely observed, let alone simply read as text) the rite as either minister, singer, penitent or member of the lay congregation.

When the initial rough cut of the audio-visual recording was made, the lay congregation was largely unrepresented: the emphasis was on those in the chancel (priest, assistants and singers) and the penitents, leaving the third (and most numerous) group largely unrepresented. In many respects, though entirely coincidentally, this reflected the liturgical scholarship of the earlier twentieth century, which emphasised (as do the medieval liturgical books) the roles of priests and their assistants, and to an extent the singers. For a significant number of the scholars present at St Teilo's the people in the nave were the focus of their interest. The final version of the recording (in spite of some technical problems with the nave camera) does take account all present. Taking full account of all present (collectively and individually) will be a continuing challenge in the forthcoming enactments of other medieval liturgies at St Teilo's, as will the refinement of the ways in which we encourage the participants to articulate the varied facets of their experience as fully as possible.

## **Postscript**

In the week following the Reconciliation of Penitents I attended the funeral Mass of one of the monks of Mount Saint Bernard Abbey in Leicestershire. Here was a different liturgical context: a community of monks was burying one of their own, a man who had been with them for over half a century, sharing prayer, meals, work and the whole of monastic life with them within an enclosed community every day. It was a moving liturgy in its own right, but following on from the experience at St Teilo's, I was particularly interested to observe the ways in which a community that worshipped together seven times each day adapted to a less familiar liturgy. The community has a collective, embodied repertory of gestures, movements, aural customs, undertaken within a tempered monastic ethos. On this occasion, however, the control – and especially the non-verbal signals – of the abbot were more evident than in the daily liturgical round; the movements of the community were less assured, even less formal; and there was greater need for brief consultation and prompting. Perhaps this offered a further insight into the way in which an infrequently performed rite like the Reconciliation of Penitents might have been conducted in the Middle Ages: the opening of

the rite prepared but unfamiliar and perhaps not polished; the second part far more familiar in content and location in the chancel, and therefore more likely assured.

## Appendix

### Reconciliation of Penitents: Three scenarios for the penitents

drawing on elements of The Great Cursing found in *Manuale et processionale ad usum insignis ecclesiae Eboracensis*, ed. W. G. Henderson, Surtees Society, 63 (1874), pp. 119-122

#### **Mistress Judith Aveling**

*Also all heretics who do not believe in the sacrament of the altar, which is God's own body in flesh and blood in form, and in the other sacraments concerning the health of the soul.*

A literate woman of a merchant family who has knowledge of languages and considerable learning, and an enquiring mind. She has been in the company of a scholar of radical belief from Germany, who has shared the thinking of Huldrych Zwingli with her. She herself has been heard to question the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist – a matter she did not deny when challenged by the parish priest.

#### **Mistress Ann Duthie**

*Also all women who destroy their own family or their children with strong drink or other cunning.*

*Also all who wilfully hire out their children, or abandon them in the field, or in town, or at the church door.*

A good woman whose husband and son-in-law (with their daughter) have been forced to find work elsewhere. Having been given care of her grandchild this past year, she has in her loneliness taken to drink, and has been so often full of drink that she has frequently locked the child out of the house at night. That child has been found sleeping in the hedgerow in summer and autumn, and during the winter (for want of shelter) discovered shivering in the church porch on the stone bench by the clerk opening the church before morrow Mass.

#### **Master Nicholas Kerwin**

*It also curses all those who knowingly or wilfully subvert tithes; who fail to offer to God and the Church a tenth part of everything that they have lawfully acquired though gain, merchandise, or anything else, ...*

*Also all who fail to pay their full tithes (whether of the fruits of the earth, or cattle, or any other annual crop), by withdrawing costs for themselves.*

*Also all who withhold tithes, rents or offerings (or anything else that should be given to the church) because they bear a grudge against the parson, the parish priest, the clerk, or any other minister.*

A carpenter, who having taken away the great oak from the churchyard that fell in the storm in November two years ago, and having sawn it into boards and let them season, is reported to have sold off one quarter of the boards to a merchant of the city nearby for his new house. He has only paid the church for the remaining portion of the boards he sold; he has withheld both the payment received from the merchant and the tithe payable from his own profit from that sale. Further, when challenged by the parish clerk at his door, he slammed the door in anger in his face, giving him a bloody nose.