THE DARK BOX

A SECRET HISTORY
of CONFESSION

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I was so full of joy, submitting and humbling
myself before the confessor, a simple, timid
priest, and exposing all the filth of my soul;
I was so full of joy at my thoughts merging with
the aspirations of the fathers who wrote the
ritual prayers;
I was so full of joy to be one with all believers,
past and present . . .

—Leo Tolstoy, *Confession*, translated from
the Russian by Peter Carson, 2013

CONTENTS

PART ONE

A BRIEF HISTORY *of* CONFESSION

One

Early Penitents and Their Penances

Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!

—Psalm 51

On the day known as Ash Wednesday, many Christians the world over sport a dark smudge on their foreheads in the shape of a cross. They are marking the beginning of the penitential season of Lent with a public display that harks back to the remote origins of the sacrament of penance. That morning they have received on the brow in memory of the crucifixion a sign in ash made from burnt palm leaves and olive oil, to the accompaniment of the words 'Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you will return!'[1] But there is an earlier tradition of marking the head with

ashes that has its origins in Jewish and Christian rituals for the reconciliation of sinners.

The Hebrew prophets and poets dwelt on guilt, individually and collectively. 'My sin', wrote the Psalmist, 'is always before me.' And, 'I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink.' Ritualistic contrition had antecedents in the Jewish Day of Atonement, involving a day and night of fasting. The tradition developed over many centuries and was originally a means of making reparation for mistakes and incorrect rituals in temple sacrifices. We read in Jonah how the Ninevites averted God's anger by wearing sackcloth and ashes and engaging in fasting and prayer. In time, the Day of Atonement, practised widely in synagogues in the absence of the Temple (after 70 CE), encouraged reconciliation with those whom one had wronged as well as sorrow for offending God. In the Jewish tradition, while sins against God could only be forgiven by God, sins against one's neighbour had to be forgiven both by that neighbour and by God. Repentance, according to the Sages, brought about acquittal and purity, allowing men and women to come close to God. The central meaning of atonement was this 'at-one-ment'.[2]

In the course of Jesus's ministry, we find him expressing a purer Hebrew prophetic tradition which required a change of heart rather than an external ritual. He said of Mary Magdalene: 'Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much.' Critics who question the Scriptural origins of the Catholic sacrament of penance cite several examples—the woman taken in adultery, the prodigal son, the penitent

thief, Peter's forgiveness for his denial of Christ—demonstrating the absence of an external agent, a priest or confessor, serving as mediator. James and John spoke of the need for all Christians to tell each other their sins.[3]

The principal rite of absolution of sins in the early Church was baptism, which was bestowed on adult converts. Baptism washed away the original sin of Adam and Eve. Atonement for sin had been achieved once and for all with Christ's sacrifice on the cross and was now completed for each individual in the waters of baptism. Nor was candidacy for baptism made easy. Catechumens—those preparing for Christian membership—were obliged to submit to long periods of prayer and austerity, and even to call on the services of official exorcists to cast out their demons.

Yet as the primitive Church grew and expanded, and members of the faithful fell by the wayside, rituals of reconciliation emerged as once-in-a-lifetime events. Christians often found themselves under threat and in a minority, fearful for their livelihoods and very lives. Those who committed serious crimes were a threat to the community. Christians were convinced, moreover, that Judgement Day would come sooner rather than later. Sinners stood in imminent danger of eternal damnation. In the early era of the Church, members of the faithful who had been excluded for grave sins were readmitted only after the completion of a series of painful public ceremonies.

The way back was harsh, melodramatic, and communal. Barefoot penitents—garbed in sackcloth, heads shaven,

faces and skulls besmirched with filth—were summoned to approach the altar and the assembly's bishop at the beginning of Lent. After the congregation had chanted lengthy petitions to the saints, the penitents rose to confess their sins out loud: principally adultery, violence, and idolatry. In one ceremony the clergy and the laity cried out '*Indulgentia*' (Mercy), 'Release us from our misery!' 'Help all penitents!' St. Jerome wrote, of a widowed Roman penitent accused of adultery, 'The bishop, the priests, and the people wept with her. Her hair dishevelled, her face pale, her hands dirty, her head covered in ashes, she beat her naked breast and face with which she had seduced her second husband. She revealed to all her wounds, and Rome, in tears, contemplated the scars on her emaciated body.'[4] The readmission of penitents to the assembly, in many cases dependent on the communal decision of the congregation, traditionally took place on Maundy Thursday of Holy Week.

The evolution of ritual was not without problems. There were early rigorist groups who insisted that lapsed Christians should never be allowed re-entry. Casuistic arguments arose, especially over the circumstances of sexual sin—a focus of obsessive anxiety among early Christians. The influential second-century writer Tertullian, a lawyer by profession and a keen disciplinarian by temperament, was convinced that sex even between married couples polluted both body and soul. Women, moreover, constituted a permanent provocation to chastity. He saw them as indeterminate human beings. They were, as he expressed it in

his *De Cultu Feminarum*, the 'Devil's Gateway', a breach in the citadel of the Church through which the secular world would enter to poison the chaste assemblies of male saints. Perpetual virginity in a woman was the highest virtue, in his view; even second marriage after widowhood was for him a kind of adultery. The delight of orgasm, he insisted, was shameful. 'In that final release of pleasure, do we not sense a loss of our very souls?' Tertullian argued that the principal sins—apostasy, idolatry, adultery, and homicide—were unforgivable, setting the scene not only for increasing exclusions from reconciliation, despite contrition, but debates about the extent and limits of adultery. So we find Bishop Cyprian of Carthage in 259 asking whether a consecrated virgin (a woman who had taken a vow of lifetime celibacy), guilty of a sin against chastity, was truly an adulteress, since she was not married. He concluded after much debate that she should suffer the same penalties as an authentic adulterer, as she had committed the sin against her spiritual spouse, Jesus Christ.[5]

On a windswept rock rising sheer out of the Atlantic some eight miles off the coast of Kerry, Ireland, stand the remains of a primitive monastery known as Skellig Michael, believed to have been founded in the sixth century. On this forbidding island, a community of monks lived a life of isolation, prayer, and penance for centuries. In such places, at the far-flung