

Performances of Contrition and Compassion

An Inquiry Into the Development of a Medieval Ritual of Confession in the 13th Century

Today, the Catholic notion of “confession” evokes a very specific setting (for example, a wooden confessional box) and a well-established ritual. However, these are all modern creations. While a relatively rich bibliography exists about medieval confession, little attention has been paid to its most practical and material dimension: where and how did confessions take place? Were particular objects, gestures and formulaic expressions involved? Can we trace the development of a specific ritual of confession, at least after Innocent III's decree *Omnis utriusque sexus* (1215), which made confession compulsory for all laypeople at least once per year?

This gap in historiography is almost certainly linked to the paucity of medieval sources about the ritual and practical dimension of confession. I propose to look at both textual and iconographical sources representing confessions in the period ca. 1215-1315 by paying particular attention to the gestures (including body positions and facial expressions) of the penitent and of the confessor, considered as a whole as a religious performance. For example, the frequent representation of the penitents as kneeling or crying can be interpreted as a performance of contrition, whereas the confessor's representation oscillates between the role of the judge (often seated and impassible) and that of the physician, who engages with his patient in an active and tangible way. Approaching confession as a performance appears justified considering that normally the penitent and the confessor were not hidden from sight, but rather could be seen – if not heard – by many people. This helps to understand the crucial and multifaceted role played by the senses in both the theorization, the practice and the perception of confession.