

# To Minister in the Sight of the Almighty

## *The Medieval Theology of Sin*

By David Golding

Augustine of Hippo, a central figure in the development of Christian theology, included in his *Confessions* a candid appraisal of his youth. “To Carthage I came,” he wrote in the late fourth century, “where there sang all around me in my ears a cauldron of unholy loves.... I defiled, therefore, the spring of friendship with the filth of concupiscence, and I beclouded its brightness with the hell of lustfulness.”<sup>1</sup> His adolescence, he admitted, was filled with sexual experiments and numerous lustful temptations. From age sixteen on, Augustine wrestled not only with what he later termed the “original sin” as a personal temptation, but also as a theological question hitherto overlooked. In the *Confessions* and later works, his articulation of the theology of sin would last through the entire Middle Ages and into the Reformation. In short, Augustine’s categorical rejection of lust was synonymous with other sins; lust was at the root of all forms of wickedness. This conclusion about original sin was so fundamental to all other theological inquiries that it served as a starting point for most medieval theological developments thereafter. By the late Middle Ages, the theology of sin had been traditionally treated as more or less the theology of lust, and significant redefinitions surfaced from church councils and in the public mind.

When Pope Innocent III convened the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, the church had already seen four crusades, was in the middle of denouncing the heresy of the Albigensians, and was at the pinnacle of their political power.

Over four hundred bishops, eight hundred priests, and representatives of all the princes of Europe attended the council making it the greatest ecclesiastical assembly of the century.<sup>2</sup> The canons later issued by the council began with a confession of belief, namely, the triune nature of the Trinity. Interestingly, this recapitulation of fundamental Catholic belief treated directly the subject of sin: “For the devil and other demons were created by God naturally good, but they became evil by their own doing. Man, however, sinned by the suggestion of the devil.”<sup>3</sup> Earlier theologians had debated man’s inability to sin. Some argued that in God’s infinite wisdom he knew precisely those that would choose hell and those that would not. Others claimed that because God had ordained all things, man actually did not have the capacity to choose sin or righteousness. Here, the council settled the debate; man could choose sin and man would be judged for it. Jesus Christ “descended in spirit and rose again in flesh, and ascended in both alike to come at the end of the world to judge the quick and the dead, and to render to every man according to his works ... whether good or bad.”<sup>4</sup>

The council treated various aspects of the implications of man’s ability to sin, and like Augustine, held that original sin had forever depraved humanity. The canons uniquely opposed sin by denouncing specific heresies and imposing punishments for weightier sins. Nearly one thousand years previously, Augustine’s doctrinal ideals still lingered in their understanding of original sin. However, new developments were certainly apparent in the theology of the thirteenth century clergy’s dealings with marriage policy. The unchanging doctrine of original sin in the midst of total reformulations of marriage theology during this and previous councils demonstrate the church’s struggle with specific theology regarding sin.

### **Biblical interpretation of sin**

The official source for the medieval theology of sin was the Bible, particularly the Vulgate translation but interpretations of the Bible varied tremendously. God spoke to Moses the commandment to not commit adultery (Exodus 20:14) and Christ took that sin a step further: “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath

committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matthew 5:27–28). Many ascetics purposefully took these teachings to an extreme. If one could commit adultery by giving in to the temptation of lust, then how simply could one commit other unchaste sins? The answer, some felt, required total removal from any and all lustful temptations. Monasteries increased in number as did ascetic orders and celibates, all recognizing to one degree or another the threat of temptations of the flesh.

The Bible story begins with Adam and Eve and their fall from grace, the implications of which influenced medieval exegesis in all its forms. Man began as a living soul comprised of the “breath of life” and the “dust of the ground,” a natural being touched by God, not a depraved creature with sexual cravings. Both the man and woman were naked, but had no shame in their nakedness, implying an innocence to sex. The Bible explains how Eve was tempted by the serpent to partake of forbidden fruit, and as she and Adam did so, their “eyes were opened” and they comprehended their nakedness (Genesis 2–3). Various interpretations of these two opening chapters all credited Adam and Eve with the introduction of sin into the world. The terms used in the Bible to describe their sin had connotations to lust for medieval theologians: appetite for things forbidden; nakedness; man and woman together in Eden; once partaking of the forbidden fruit, they suddenly become aware of nakedness while simultaneously knowing good and evil for the first time; the woman being beguiled by the serpent and in turn tempting the man. The first sin, while not the most vile, was the impetus for all others. This worldview of the beginning of the human race was by far the most common and served as the basis for the church’s existence. All men were born in sin, all would die in sin unless the church intervened and provided works necessary to save the soul. Medieval clergy had been so brought up in this worldview that literally everything was seen in terms of sin.

The twelfth century monk Guibert of Nogent described a common fear among celibates in his memoir (incidentally influenced strongly by Augustine’s *Confessions*). “I sin, it is true,” he wrote, “but when reason returns, I repent that I yielded to the lust of my heart and that my soul, with unwilling heaviness, bedded itself in baskets full of dung.”<sup>5</sup> He continues mourning for his propensity to sin and consistently mentions lust, even when speaking of other vices that generally appear disconnected from any kind of lustful nature.

Sin to Guibert is more than an undesirable attribute of his daily life but a stench, a “stinking willfulness” and “extremely ugly.” “If I do not understand what is good, how shall I be able to know evil, much less to forswear it?” he asks. Torn in his quest to seek out the beautiful things of God and to yet avoid the temptation of lust (“beauty [is] but an empty show”), Guibert takes comfort in the goodness of his mother and in the fact that unreservedly seeking out the good empowers one to resist evil. Notwithstanding being constantly surrounded by an evil world, “there remains to me the hope of that salvation which is open to all.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Ecclesiastical ambiguities**

Definitions of sin were much less accessible to medieval society than were legal statutes. For example, the church enacted consanguinity laws that established prohibited degrees of kinship for marriage. Violations of consanguinity laws were palpable; engaged persons had a tangible pedigree that showed their family lines. However, how did one gauge sin in general? Adultery could be committed with a thought. Christians defaulted to visible manifestations of a person’s progress with dealing with sin: public confession to a priest, public penance, and the sacraments of the church. The rise of monasticism and religious imperialism had their roots in this understanding of sin and the church’s institutional reaction to it.

The war against the flesh, for Guibert and other monks, was strictly internal. These theologians fully believed that the flesh could overpower the soul with lust despite an absence of any physical sin. When debating sin, medieval theologians almost unavoidably reverted to this fear of man’s primal tendency to lust after the flesh, and a general consensus about the place of sex within or without marriage was never fully achieved. Ecclesiastical ambiguities resulted, with some clerics claiming total virginity while others even engaged in the marriage practice.

As early as the first century, the very idea of marriage as a religious institution received treatment from Paul. The apostle not only expressed favor of marriage, but specifically praised the sexual union—the Christian faithful ought to leave father and mother and marry a spouse, and “become one flesh” (Ephesians 5:25–33). By the fourth century, however, monks would

debate the essence of Paul's instructions regarding marriage. Jovinian, a monk in about 390, wrote a tract in which he claimed that virginity was not superior to marriage.<sup>7</sup> St. Jerome, the revered translator of the Vulgate Bible, replied to this tract so harshly that his *Adversus Jovinianum* literally became what one scholar called, "the basic medieval textbook for antifeminism."<sup>8</sup> "Marriage fills the earth," wrote Jerome, "virginity heaven."<sup>9</sup> In response to the question of what to do about the necessity of continuing the human species and his incompatible views on virginity, Jerome retorted by asking, If we all became philosophers, who would till the fields?<sup>10</sup> Not unlike capitalists who trust that incentives will motivate somebody to take on undesirable jobs in an economy, Jerome counted on sinners to procreate. Theologically, he preferred that humans simply die out and go to heaven than to continue in mortal lusts. Jerome went so far as to write that virginity could be lost "even by a thought," so sinful was the inner desire of lust.<sup>11</sup> The superior place of virginity was self-evident in the Incarnation—"Death came through Eve, but life has come through Mary," a virgin.<sup>12</sup>

None other than Augustine joined in on the debate, praising marriage as a "safeguard against adultery or fornication" and the "pardonable" outlet for sexual intercourse. Augustine went so far as to insist that marriage deserved to include intercourse beyond mere procreation, writing that Paul himself "permits in married couples [intercourse], allowing them to indulge in sex beyond the purpose of procreation[.]"<sup>13</sup>

The earliest Christian fathers diverged on the topic of lust. Augustine found a place for it within the bonds of marriage; Jerome never could allow it given the possibility to practice lifelong abstinence. Later centuries experienced similar ambiguities. For instance, candidates for bishoprics would, at one point, be required to despise marriage to obtain an appointment; a century later, Pope Gregory I declared the repudiation of marriage as heresy.<sup>14</sup> Medieval sermons began to use the term "intimate love" to describe an alternative function of lust, or rather, an altogether redefinition of lust as a righteous practice between a husband and wife. Gérard de Mailly, for one, specifically spoke of "intimate" love between a husband and wife in his sermons and urged his married listeners to abandon feelings of guilt because their relations were duly ordained by God.<sup>15</sup>

In 1140, Gratian's work *Concordia discordantium canonum* (later known as simply the *Decretum*) for the first time specified the precise moment of the marriage covenant. The formal agreement of marriage nor the religious ceremony constituted the beginning of marriage but it was the consummation of marriage by the husband and wife. Pope Innocent III relied on this definition of marriage in decretal letters which set legal precedent for marriage, and institutionally, the matter of lust was put to rest in marriage. Not only was sex in marriage lawful and not grounds for sin, but was precisely what constituted a marriage.<sup>16</sup> Sin had, and to a certain extent would always, maintain a fleshy foundation. After all, sin itself was introduced to the world as a result of Adam and Eve's partaking of forbidden fruit (regarded largely by then as sexual intercourse); all sin in one way or another flowed out from that original fall from grace. But the theology of sin by the thirteenth century was articulated more officially by the Fourth Lateran Council in terms other than mere lust that brought an end to the ecclesiastical ambiguities of centuries past.

### **The theology of sin and the Fourth Lateran Council**

Canon 14 dealt most specifically with clerical sin but voiced official policy of the church of the theology of sin:

...let all strive to live continently and chastely;... let them seek to avoid completely the sin of lust—particularly that on account of which the anger of God comes down from heaven upon the sins of disobedience—in order that they may be able to minister in the sight of Almighty God with a pure heart and a clean body.<sup>17</sup>

Easy pardons and lenient penances could lead to an “incentive to sin,” the canon stated. “Prelates who venture to support such in their wickedness, especially for money or other temporal advantage, shall be subject to ... punishment.”<sup>18</sup> The most notable element of the council's articulations of the theology of sin was its description of confession. “Every Christian of either sex after reaching the years of discretion shall confess all his sins at least once a year” and the person should work hard to perform the penance imposed. The priest “should be discerning and prudent so that like a practiced doctor he can

pour wine and oil on the wounds of the injured.” It was vital that the priest inquire diligently into “the circumstances of the sinner and the sin.” Unconfessed sin could lead to physical sickness, and the priest ought to be consulted before the physician.<sup>19</sup> The council admonished a more pastoral duty of thirteenth century clergy and sin was regarded as a consistent problem that required annual confession. Priests now were not just participating in a rite of the church but in the healing of souls and were more important than skilled doctors. The fear of sin in earlier theologies had a permanent solution in the council’s policies on confession and the sacraments.

The theology of sin developed throughout the Middle Ages from a theology of anti-lust to a more refined theology of spiritual health and salvation. While marriage laws changed to accommodate societal changes and reformulations of the theology of sin, they did create a suitable outlet for sexual desire and relieved much of the tension described by Augustine, Jerome, Guibert and other theologians in the gospel interpretation of sin. New features of the theology of sin found expression in the Fourth Lateran Council and ultimately served as the basis of the church’s spiritual authority until the Reformation. In a way, the church would always have to deal with the world’s ignorance of God and “the shadow of death,”<sup>20</sup> but armed with a less ambiguous theology, it would at least have means to heal that medieval world. One afflicted like Augustine with the noise of a “cauldron of unholy loves” could now find a consistent strain of counsel from a priest and healing from a spiritual surgeon.

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 3, Chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick J. Geary, ed., *Readings in Medieval History*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2003), 2:117.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 2:34.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 2:34–37.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher N. L. Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 61.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>9</sup> Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I:13, 16; XXIII:232, 235.

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<sup>10</sup> Brooke, 62.

<sup>11</sup> Jerome, *Letter to Eustochium*, XXII:5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, XXII:21.

<sup>13</sup> Conor McCarthy, *Marriage in Medieval England: Law, Literature and Practice* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), 109.

<sup>14</sup> Michael M. Sheehan, *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe: Collected Studies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 300.

<sup>15</sup> D. L. D'Avary, *Medieval Marriage Sermons: Mass Communication in a Culture without Print* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 256–57.

<sup>16</sup> Frederik Pedersen, *Marriage Disputes in Medieval England* (London: Hambledon and London, 2000), 1–3.

<sup>17</sup> Geary, 2:125

<sup>18</sup> Geary, 2:124–25.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:126–27.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:33.