

THE PSEUDO-AMPHILOCHIAN LIFE OF ST. BASIL :  
ECCLESIASTICAL PENANCE  
AND BYZANTINE HAGIOGRAPHY

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Among students of Byzantine civilization there exists at the present time an enthusiasm for hagiography which is quite new. A stream of articles, books and theses exploiting the information contained in the Lives of the Greek saints continues in full spate<sup>1</sup>. Now, for

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[For the editions of the *Vitae* cited in this study, reference to F. Halkin, *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca* (=BHG), Brussels 1957<sup>3</sup> with the *Auctarium Bibliothecae Hagiographicae Graecae*, Brussels 1969 is presumed throughout.]

1. An invaluable introduction to the topic by F. Halkin, «L' hagiographie byzantine au service de l' histoire,» in *Proceedings of the XIIIth International Congress of Byzantine Studies. Oxford 5-10 Sept. 1966*, edd. J. M. Hussey/D. Obolensky/S. Runciman, London 1967 pp. 345-354 with further references there. See also the dissertation of H. J. Magoulias, *The Lives of the Saints as Sources of Data for Sixth and Seventh Century Byzantine Social and Economic History*, Harvard 1962 and the subsequent articles: «The Lives of the Saints as sources of Data for the History of Byzantine Medicine in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries», BZ 57 (1964) 127-150; «The Lives of Byzantine Saints as Sources of Data for the History of Magic in the VIth and VIIth Centuries: Sorcery, Relics and Icons», *Byzantion* 37 (1967) 228-369; «Bathhouse, Inn, Tavern, Prostitution and the Stage in the Lives of the Saints of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries,» *ΕΒΒΣ* 38 (1971) 233-252; «The Lives of the Saints as Sources of Data for the History of Commerce in the Byzantine Empire in the VIth and VIIth Centuries,» *Κληρονομία* 3 (1971) 303-330. To this list may be added: E. Patlagean, «Ancienne hagiographie byzantine et histoire sociale,» *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 23 [1-2] (1968) 106-126; D. Z. de F. Abrahamse, *Hagiographic Sources for Byzantine Cities. 500-900 A.D.* Dissertation: University of Michigan 1967; J. W. Nesbitt, «The Life of St. Philaretos (702-792) and Its Significance for Byzantine Agriculture,»

the Bollandists who have stuck so faithfully to their last over more than three centuries, such enthusiasm must be both refreshing and gratifying, but it is neither unkind nor perhaps unfair to suggest that much of this new fervour for the saints derives less from devotion than from a certain frustration Byzantinists experience when they confront both the meagreness of the historical and documentary resources at their disposal and the curiously artificial literary character of so many of these which makes of them, in Professor Cyril Mango's happy phrase, a «distorting mirror»<sup>2</sup>. By contrast, the abundant testimony of the many Lives of the Greek saints seems to hold out to the historian the possibility of his coming into contact more directly and in a much more sustained fashion with the realities of ordinary life in the Byzantine world.<sup>3</sup>

There is every reason, then, for the ecclesiastical historian in his turn to sift the hagiographical tradition to recover what evidence it will provide for the shape of Byzantine religious life. But there may also be reason to temper this new enthusiasm for hagiography in the fires of experience.<sup>4</sup>

This paper will attempt to report very briefly a few results for the history of penance which follow upon an exhaustive examination of the pre-Metaphrastic corpus of Byzantine hagiography (that is, down to the late tenth century), and then go on to consider in more detail, and with special reference to the evidence for ecclesiastical penance contained in the Pseudo-Amphilochian Life of St. Basil (*BHG* 247-259), some of the limitations of the hagiographical sources in this area.

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*GOTR* 14 (1969) 150-158; the welcome reprint of A. P. Rudakov, *Ocherki vizantijskoj kul'tury po dannym grecheskoj agiografii*, rp. London 1970; P. Brown, «The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,» *JRS* 61 (1971) 80-101 and «A Dark Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy,» *EHR* 88 (1973) 1-34; J. Wortley, «The Vita Sancti Andreae Sali as a Source of Byzantine Social History,» *Societas* 4 (1974) 1-20; W. E. Kaegi Jr., «Notes on Hagiographic Sources for Some Institutional Changes and Continuities in the Early Seventh Century,» *Byzantina* 7 (1975) 59-70; E. Gamillscheg, «Historische Gegebenheiten im Spiegel hagiographischer Texte,» *JOBG* 25 (1975) 1-23; K. M. Ringrose, *Saints, Holy Men and Byzantine Society 726-843*, Dissertation: Rutgers University 1976; A. Moffatt, «Schooling in the Iconoclast Centuries,» in *Iconoclasm*, edd. A. Bryer/J. Herrin, Birmingham 1971, pp. 85-92; I. Ševcenko, «Hagiography of the Iconoclast Period,» in *Iconoclasm*, pp. 113-131. The list is by no means exhaustive.

2. C. Mange; *Byzantine Literature as a Distorting Mirror*, Oxford 1975.

3. Kalkin, «L' hagiographie....,» p. 347.

4. Patlagean, «Ancienne hagiographie....,» pp. 106-107 and 107 note 1 has valuable observations on the use of hagiographical texts.

*HAGIOGRAPHICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE HISTORY  
OF BYZANTINE PENANCE*

1. It can be said first of all that the weight of hagiographical testimony clearly contradicts the view reported by Socrates and Sozomen (and still found in many histories of penance) that Patriarch Nectarius effectively did away with all ecclesiastical penance at Constantinople towards the end of the fourth century, and that this action of his was followed by the rest of the Greek-speaking churches.<sup>5</sup> In fact, however, the Lives of the saints from the fourth through the tenth centuries provide abundant witness to the health of the various institutions of ecclesiastical penance (excommunication, suspension and deposition of clerics, reconciliation — especially of heretics, schismatics and apostates — and the pastoral correction or ἐλεγχος of sinners exercised by the bishop). They also reflect a gradual, not sudden, change from the shape of Early Christian penitential ritual and practice to one very like that of the modern Greek Orthodox use.<sup>6</sup>

2. Paradoxically, however, the Lives also confirm the truth of the statement in Socrates' *History* that the effect of Nectarius' decision to suppress the priest-penitentiary was to leave every Christian to his own conscience with respect to participation in the Eucharistic mysteries.<sup>7</sup> According to the hagiographical evidence the initiative in

5. Socrates, *HE* 5.19, ed. Hussey, vol 2, Oxford 1853, pp. 614. 1-616.15; Sozomen, *HE* 7.16, edd. Bidez/Hansen (=GCS 50), pp. 322.17-324.15. For a discussion of the evidence for ecclesiastical penance in these two authors see J. Ibanez Ibanez and F. Mendoza Ruiz, «La praxis penitencial y sus presupuestos teológicos en los historiadores griegos de la época constantiniana,» in *El sacramento de la penitencia. Otros estudios. XXV Semana española de teología 14-18 Sept. 1970*, Madrid 1972, pp. 197-221 at pp. 202-209. Reference to the Nectarius incident may be found in every history of penance and in most church histories as well. F. Frank, «Die verhängnisvolle Beicht zu Konstantinopel unter der Regierung des Patriarchen Nektarius,» *Theologische Quartalschrift* 49 (1867) 529-558 has given a brief résumé (pp. 542-548) of previous interpretations. Further extended treatments of the incident after the time of Frank can be found in: G. Rauschen, *Jahrbücher der christlichen Kirche unter dem Kaiser Theodosius dem Grossen*, Freiburg-im Breisgau 1897, pp. 537-544; Holl, *Enthusiasmus...*, pp. 246-253 and 274-275; E. Vacandard, «L' origine des prêtres-pénitenciers,» *Revue du clergé français* 42 (1905) 361-386, 449-456 (=a reply to Vacandard by P. Batiffol) and 640-643.

6. The evidence is collected and analysed in R. Barringer, *Ecclesiastical Penance in the Church of Constantinople: A Study of the Hagiographical Evidence to 983 AD*, Doctoral Thesis: Oxford University 1979.

7. Socrates, *HE* 5.19, ed. Hussey, vol. 2, Oxford 1853, p. 615.15-16: συγχωρησαι δὲ ἕκαστον τῷ ἰδίῳ συνειδότι τῶν μυστηρίων μετέχειν.

the sphere of penance remained for all practical purposes with the sinner. In effect this meant that he could choose not to do any penance at all — a course which many people obviously followed — or, if he did repent, that he could seek divine forgiveness in a wide variety of ways that did not necessarily involve any recourse to the clergy or to the institutions of ecclesiastical penance: simple conversion of life or «starting over again» (διόρθωσις), the taking on of an anonymous penance such as the care of the sick, service at the shrine of a saint, entry into the monastic life, deathbed assumption of the monastic habit (although this is not attested in the *Vitae* before the ninth century<sup>8</sup>), almsgiving and fasting, faith in the powerful intercession of the martyrs and saints or in the charismatic assurance (πληροφορία) of God's forgiveness given by living monks and holy men. Thus, while voluntary confession of sin to the bishop or other clergy was also a possible form of repentance/μετάνοια, it cannot be stressed too highly that throughout the period from the fourth to the tenth century penance (μετάνοια) included much more than confession (ἐξαγόρευσις), and the hagiographical evidence as a whole implies that voluntary ἐξαγόρευσις did not become normal practice among ordinary Byzantine Christians much before the ninth century.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, nothing in the Lives suggests that Byzantine lay people were ever under any *obligation* to resort to ecclesiastical penance during this period, even in the case of serious sin.

3. A final matter perhaps worthy of special mention is the question of unordained confessors, that is to say, the claim that the Byzantine laity routinely confessed their sins and secured ecclesiastical pardon from unordained monks. Karl Holl made this practice one of the pillars of his interpretation of the history of Byzantine penance as a conflict between monastic *Charisma* and clerical office (*Amt*), an interpretation that remains authoritative in many circles to this

8. Even at this date the references to the practice may simply refer to entry into the monastic life shortly before death. Cf. *Vita Gregorii Decapolitae* 23 (*BHG* 711) ed. Dvornik, p. 65.19-22.

9. The practice is *recommended* in the eight-century *Vita Stephani Sabaitae* 90, 115-122 (*BHG* 1670) ed. Pien, pp. 568D-E, 578F-581B [cf. *Narratio de Zenone monacho* (*BHG* 1438t)], but first finds convincing illustration as a custom of the laity in the ninth-century Lives of Nicetas (*BHG* 1344), Joannicius (*BHG* 936, 935) and Eustratius (*BHG* 645). Before this period the vast majority of «confessions» in the hagiographical sources, both from monks and from the laity, have to be extracted by the confessor/saint, often with the help of his miraculous ability to read hearts.

day.<sup>10</sup> Comprehensive and systematic study of the hagiographical sources reveals firstly, however, that the few examples of the phenomenon of unordained confessors adduced by Holl are not, as he claims, typical of many other such stories, and secondly, that upon closer scrutiny, none of the texts that he cites from the period before the eighth century can be admitted as evidence for his thesis at all.<sup>11</sup> The hagiographical evidence leads rather to the conclusion that, like *voluntary* confession itself, the practice of confession to unordained monks — and most certainly the understanding of this practice as related to the Church's *Bussgewalt*, authority to forgive sins — only grew to be of any importance to ordinary Christians during the course of the ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>12</sup> The practice itself is clearly rooted in monastic values and customs which are many centuries older (confession of «thoughts» [λογισμοί], charismatic intercession and *πληροφορία*, the assumption of responsibility for someone else's sins, etc.), but the evidence of the Lives does *not* support the view that confession/absolution ministered by unordained monks was traditional, or that it even formed an important undercurrent in the history of Byzantine eccle-

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10. K. Holl, *Enthusiasmus und Bussgewalt beim griechischen Mönchtum. Eine Studie zu Symeon dem Neuen Theologen*, Leipzig 1898, especially at pp. 314-319 and 328-331.

The other major study is J. Hörmann, *Untersuchungen zur griechischen Laienbeicht. Ein Beitrag zur allgemeinen Bussgeschichte*, Donauwörth 1913, but the book is rare and Hörmann accepts the main lines of Holl's presentation with supplementary information and corrections.

11. Holl, *Enthusiasmus...*, pp. 314-317. For the period until 692 Holl gives four examples of confessions made by laymen to monks: James of Nisibis, Symeon Stylites, John the Hesychast, and a «monk» in the *Pratum spirituale*. James of Nisibis and John the Hesychast were, however, both bishops. Symeon Stylites was not a priest but the confession in question was made publicly to him and to the crowd and the man sought the *intercession* of Symeon to obtain the cure of his affliction as well as the forgiveness of his sin. The monk in *Pratum spirituale* 78 was the hegumen of a monastery (not a hermit as Holl describes him) who provoked the confession not of a lay visitor to the monastery but of a man who had come to the monastery to become a monk. It cannot be known whether the hegumen was ordained or unordained.

12. There are no hagiographical examples of anything similar to a *claim* on the part of unordained monks to exercise the apostolic *Bussgewalt* of binding and loosing before the late tenth century, that is, the period immediately preceding that of Symeon the New Theologian. See *Vita Pauli Iunioris* 32 (*BHG* 1474) ed. Delehaye, p. 142.12-14 and *Vita Lucae Iunioris* 28 (*BHG* 944) ed. Martini, pp. 96.24-33, 96.35-97.4.

siastical penance<sup>13</sup>. The significance of the custom such as it did exist is more accurately interpreted as that of a late episode in Byzantine penitential history, for as soon as this *Laienbeichte* passed beyond the bounds of its role as a useful pastoral supplement and complement to the bishops' authority over binding and loosing and began to emerge — as it certainly did in the late tenth century (Paul the Younger, Luke the Younger) — as the expression of a challenge to that authority, it provoked a firm and decisive reaction on the part of the bishops and canonists<sup>14</sup>.

### LIMITATIONS OF HAGIOGRAPHICAL EVIDENCE

1. The first limitation on the historical value of hagiographical evidence is simply the ubiquity of those commonplaces or *topoi* that so mark the genre. The problem is familiar, but this familiarity does not make it any less disheartening when an accredited eyewitness of events and characters portrays these as distillations of a thousand similar experiences and removes from his account whatever might have been unique.

2. The problem of *topoi* touches all who use the Lives of the saints, but for the historian of ecclesiastical penance the most important limitation of the hagiographical sources lies simply in the anecdotal character of so much of his evidence. The success of the anecdote as a narrative form depends on severe restrictions of time, place and character and on a sharply focussed didactic intent and narrative point of view. In the case of penitential anecdotes, this inevitably means that many facets of a complex institutional reality have to be sacrificed to the requirements of the literary form.

In fact most penitential anecdotes can be grouped into two main

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13. For a discussion of the phenomenon of the *répondant du péché* see J. Gouillard, «Christianisme byzantine et slave,» *Annuaire. Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. Section V. Sciences Religieuses* 82 (1974) 215-217 with criticism and further evidence in a forthcoming article: R. Barringer, «Penance and Byzantine Hagiography: *Le répondant du péché*,» Proceedings of the Eighth International Patristic Conference, Oxford 1979.

14. J. Hajjar, *Le synode permenent (ΣΥΝΟΔΟΣ ΕΝΑΗΜΟΥΣΑ) dans l'Église byzantine des origines au VI siècle*, Paris 1962, pp. 130/1 (with texts cited there) suggests that the teaching of Symeon the New Theologian about the relationship of *Charisma* and *Amt* contributed to the decision to exile him in 1009, but the sources he cites do not confirm this explicitly. For the later reaction see Holl, *Enthusiasmus...*, pp. 324-330.

classes, the first having its dramatic centre in the conversion of the sinner, and the second in the forgiveness of a particular sin. In anecdotes of conversion, the diagnosis of the sinner's true spiritual condition and the subsequent pastoral treatment required to convert the sinner receive all the emphasis.<sup>15</sup> In anecdotes of forgiveness, stress falls rather on the power of the saint to intercede for sin and to provide the sinner with direct assurance that God has granted him forgiveness.<sup>16</sup> Neither emphasis by itself provides a complete image of the process of ecclesiastical penance and, more importantly, neither class of anecdote extends its narrative interest beyond its own inherent dramatic climax (conversion/forgiveness). The result is that certain problems of great moment for the historian of penance, as, for example, whether and from what date ecclesiastical reconciliation was granted repeatedly to the same sinner, fall right outside the purview of these narrative forms and so also of the historian's grasp.

3. A third limitation affecting the nature of hagiographical evidence for Byzantine penance is the fact that in the main the Lives were written by monks, and so serve as vehicles for the monastic analysis of sin and its remedies. This analysis is rooted in the observation of cases rather than in abstract theory and leads at times to apparently contradictory conclusions. The narrative expression of this more empirical approach is the *narratio animae utilis*, a kind of story which is really an extended form of the «word» (λόγος) given by spiritual fathers or directors to monks who sought answers to a wide variety of conflicting spiritual dilemmas.<sup>17</sup> *Narrationes* are therefore to be found which illustrate and advocate penitential remedies and positions which are, on the surface, quite opposed to one another. The historian anxious to use such sources must, like the monks themselves, learn how to harmonize the apparent inconsistencies and contradictions.

#### *THE PSEUDO-AMPHILOCHIAN LIFE OF BASIL: EVIDENCE FOR PENANCE*

These limitations are aptly illustrated by the evidence for ecclesiastical penance found in the Pseudo-Amphilochian Life of St. Basil.

15. Cf. *Vita Hypatii* 28.9-13 (BHG 760) ed. Bartelink, pp. 186/188 and *Vita Parthenii* 11 (BHG 1422) ed. Malou, PG 114. 1360C-1361A.

16. *Vita Symeonis Stylitae* 23 (BHG 1682-1683) ed. Lietzmann, p. 58.3-6.

17. J.-C. Guy, «Note sur l' évolution du genre apophtegmatique,» *Revue d' Ascétique et de Mystique* 32 (1956) 63-68.

Discussion of the problems of dating cannot be attempted here. It will be enough simply to note that a date towards the end of the sixth or perhaps in the first part of the seventh century is accepted for the *Vita* in its present form and that the most likely provenience is the region bounded by Caesarea, Iconium and Antioch.<sup>18</sup> The matter is certainly made more complex by the probability that the Life in its present form is a compilation of materials which may well have circulated separately or in smaller collections first.<sup>19</sup> An ultimate solution must await a study of the manuscript tradition both of the Greek text and of the Oriental versions, but the use of materials from the *Vita Basilii* in a discussion of sixth - or seventh - century Byzantine penance may be justified in the practical order inasmuch as each of the incidents to be examined can be paralleled very closely from dated sixth - and seventh - century Greek Lives.<sup>20</sup>

The importance of the Pseudo-Amphilochian Life of Basil for the study of Byzantine penance lies in the fact that it represents a conflation of the episcopal and monastic models of penance. Thus while it is true that throughout the *Vita* Basil remains the great bishop who oversees community discipline, the perspective from which the author views his activity is much changed when compared, for example with that adopted by Gregory Nazianzen in his funeral Oration (*BHG* 245) or in earlier episcopal Lives such as those of Athanasius (*BHG* 184) or Porphyry of Gaza (*BHG* 1570). Whereas in Nazianzen all references to Basil's disciplinary action are of the most general kind and are often expressed in vague metaphor, in the *Vita* individual cases of pe-

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18. The elements for a sixth/seventh century dating can be studied in: B. Outtier, «Saint Ephrem d'après ses biographies et ses oeuvres,» *Parole de l'Orient* 4 (1973) 11-33 at pp. 17, 27-28; O. Rousseau, «La rencontre de saint Ephrem et de saint Basile,» *L'Orient Syrien* 2 (1957) 261-284 at pp. 263-272; T. Orlandi, *Studi Copti*, Milan 1968, pp. 87-145 with the remarks of J. Gribomont, «L' historiographie du trône d' Alexandrie, avec quelques remarques sur S. Mercure, S. Basile et S. Eusèbe de Samosate» *Revista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa* 7 (1971) 478-490 at pp. 486-490.

19. See especially the studies by Outtier (meeting of Basil and Ephrem) and Orlandi (St. Mercurius, Basil and the death of Julian the Apostate) cited in note 17 above.

20. Parallels for the story of the deacon, in *Vita Euthymii* (*BHG* 647-648) and the other references in note 22 below; for the young man who renounced Christ, in *Vita Mariae Antiochenae* (*BHG* 1045) and *Narratio de Theophili paenitentia* (*BHG* 1319-1322); for the sinful woman and the written confession, in *Vita Ioannis Eleemosynarii* (*BHG* 886).



nance have become a centre of interest in themselves and the subjective dispositions of the sinners are much more to the fore.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, by comparison with the earlier episcopal Lives, a subtle shift has taken place in the very portrayal of the person of the bishop himself, for even when he acts as bishop, Basil appears more in the character of a «holy man». He is presented as the ideal monastic saint and in the penitential contexts of the Life his most characteristic activity is not much the authoritative shepherding of the flock as his direct and powerful intercession with God on behalf of men.<sup>22</sup>

The Pseudo-Amphilochian Life supplies what are apparently quite precise and even vivid details of the workings of ecclesiastical penance and it is plain that penance itself has become a direct focus of the author's attention. Nevertheless, the closest scrutiny is required to determine whether such details are accurate and perhaps unconscious reflections of the real penitential practice of a local community (at Caesarea or elsewhere), or whether their real function is to serve as a kind of literary vehicle for the author's moral. I choose three examples from the *Vita* to illustrate this point.

In *Vita* 5 Basil observes a deacon making signs to a woman in the church during the liturgy, an offence apparently serious enough to inhibit the customary visible manifestation of the Spirit's descent upon the Eucharistic gifts.<sup>23</sup> For this offence Basil suspends the deacon from his functions and subjects him to a course of penitential fasting, watching and almsgiving that lasts seven days. During this time he is supported by the prayers of the whole people assembled on Basil's orders in the church, and after the week is over he is allowed to resume his

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21. *In laudem Basilii magni* 40.1-4, 64.4, 72.4, 81.4 (*BHG* 245) ed. Boulenger, pp. 142/144, 194, 214, 228. Compare Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio in laudem Basilii* 2, 10 (*BHG* 244) ed. Morel, *PG* 46.792B 812B and contrast the cases in the *Vita Basilii* of the young man (*BHG* 253) and of the sinful rich woman (*BHG* 258) in which most of the drama of the conversion is over before either comes to meet the bishop.

22. Basil prays *with* the young man and *for* the forgiveness of the rich woman's sins: *Vita Basilii* 7 (*BHG* 253) ed. Radermacher, pp. 138.5-10 and 140.9-11; *Vita Basilii* 12 (*BHG* 258) ed. Combefis, pp. 216D, 217A-C. Chapter numbers have been assigned to the Pseudo-Amphilochian *Vita Basilii* by taking each of Halkin's main divisions in the *BHG* as a separate chapter of a continuous Life.

23. *Vita Basilii* 5 (*BHG* 251) ed. Combefis, p. 183A-B. The incident is a *topos* recounted also in the Lives of Epiphanius (*BHG* 596) and John Chrysostom (*BHG* 876m) and in *Pratum spirituale* 150 (*BHG* 1442).

ministry.<sup>24</sup> *Vita* 7 is the story of a young man who has signed a contract with the devil to renounce Christ in return for securing the affections of his beloved. After this deed is made known to Basil as bishop, the young man is made to do a penance of forty days: three days in a kind of strict quarantine with a specific and rigorous penitential regime supported by the intercession of Basil's prayers and ascesis, and the rest of the forty days in a slightly less rigorous repentance but also supported by the bishop's prayers.<sup>25</sup> After the period of forty days' penance the young man is received back to communion with great solemnity in the midst of the church whose own fervent and corporate intercession helps to overcome the last resistance of the devil and wrest from his grasp the written contract of sin. Having received the young man back to communion Basil gives him further instructions and assigns him a suitable regime of life (κωνών) for an indeterminate future period.<sup>26</sup> The last example of penance in the Life (*Vita* 12) describes the case of a wealthy woman who, after a life devoted to pleasure and completely devoid of any thought of God, is finally brought to repent by the direct intervention of God's grace.<sup>27</sup> She writes out a confession of all the sins she has committed since her youth and gives the confession, sealed, to Basil, asking him to intercede with God to obtain the forgiveness of her sins. Basil takes the sealed confession into the church, places it near the altar and prays for the woman during the all-night vigil (πανυχίς). He then summons the woman and gives her the paper from which, by a miracle, all the sins have been removed — except for the last, a «great sin».<sup>28</sup> In the end even this last sin too is removed when the woman casts the paper on the bier of Basil, who has died in the meantime, and complains that he has left her behind on earth without having secured forgiveness for her by his intercession. But when the paper is picked up and examined, it is found now to be completely blank.<sup>29</sup>

Now what is to be made of these vivid and quite precise details? Can they be accepted as accurate and perhaps unconscious reflections of local penitential practice? In *Vita* 12 a lifetime of serious sin is removed

24. *Vita Basilii* 5 (BHG 251) ed. Combefis, p. 183B-C.

25. *Vita Basilii* 7 (BHG 253) ed. Radermacher, pp. 136.2-140.12.

26. *Vita Basilii* 7 (BHG 253) ed. Radermacher, pp. 140.12-146.12, 148.1-3.

27. *Vita Basilii* 12 (BHG 258) ed. Combefis, pp. 215A-216A.

28. *Vita Basilii* 12 (BHG 258) ed. Combefis, pp. 216A-217C.

29. *Vita Basilii* 12 (BHG 258) ed. Combefis, pp. 217C-220A.

by the intercession of the bishop/saint during a single all-night vigil, and even the one sin which remains — the «great sin» — is removed in its turn after the woman has briefly demonstrated her faith and perseverance. There is no mention, however, of any of the usual institutions of ecclesiastical penance. Yet in the case of another «great» sin — that of the young man denying Christ in *Vita* 7 — the sinner is required to perform a definite term of penance (forty days) in prayer and fasting before he can be reconciled. Moreover, in the case of the distracted deacon in *Vita* 5, an apparently minor fault brings the whole community to a standstill for seven days of intense prayer and penance by sinner and congregation alike until expiation is made, a much greater penance than was required from the sinful woman of *Vita* 12.

In fact, there is no coherence here in the treatment accorded to the different sinners, even when allowance is made, as it must be, for the exercise of episcopal discretion in different circumstances. These cases cannot be made to reflect a «system» of ecclesiastical penance, much less the actual practice of a local church, but they *do* advance the didactic purposes of the author, inasmuch as each set of details furnishes its own penitential «lesson» directed to a particular audience. Thus the evident severity of the treatment meted out to the deacon may well have been aimed at a certain indiscipline in liturgical attendance among both clergy and laity. It makes the point most vividly that misconduct among Christians at the liturgy cannot be shrugged off as a matter of little importance; every moment and every gesture is of great value.<sup>30</sup> Conversely, the Faust-like story of the young man illustrates the *topos* that no sin is too big to be forgiven where there is true repentance, even for as little as forty days.<sup>31</sup> The last story of the sinful woman emphasizes another *topos*, namely, that it is never too late to repent, and that God always provides what help is needed, whether this is to bring about the conversion, simply to help a sinner re-

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30. The threat of excommunication that Basil makes in *Vita Basilii* 5 (*BHG* 251) seems to confirm this interpretation: *δισταλμένος ταῖς γυναίξιν, ὡς εἴ τις ἔξω τῶν βήλων ὀρθῇ διακόπτουσα, τῆς θείας λειτουργίας γυνομένης, ἔξωθεῖσθαι τῆς ἐκκλησίας, καὶ ἀκοινώνητον μένειν* (ed. Combefis, p. 183D). Excommunication is a severe penalty to invoke (even as a threat) in such a matter; see also *Vita Porphyrii Gazensis* 65.14-16 (*BHG* 1570) edd. Grégoire/Kugener, p. 52.

31. Cf. *Vita Philogonii* 4 (*BHG* 1532) ed. Montfaucon, *PG* 48.756:18-37, 753:1-21, 754:40-47 and *Vita Symeonis Stylitae* 20 (*BHG* 1682-1683) ed. Lietzmann, p. 40. 11-13.

call all his sins, or to effect the forgiveness, of each and every sin through the intercession of his saints.<sup>32</sup>

These different penitential lessons or morals *can* be integrated into a coherent *theory* about repentance for sin and the availability of salvation to all (=monastic doctrine), but there is no reason to believe that the details from such lessons should be taken to reflect the operations of a real penitential system. Instead, they betray a literary conflation of what may be called the episcopal and monastic models of penance and are determined in large measure by the dramatic needs of each anecdote and its peculiar moral. The episcopal model is reflected in the story of the deacon and that of the young man which portray the bishop as the linchpin of all ecclesiastical discipline, and make the reception of the Eucharist the goal of penance and the climax of the anecdote. The monastic model is reflected in *Vita* 12 where the sense of hierarchical order is more remote. It is as saint rather than as bishop that Basil intercedes with God, and the aim of the whole process is assurance of the forgiveness/expiation of individual sins.<sup>33</sup> The Pseudo-Amphilochian Life of Basil demonstrates, therefore, that by the end of the sixth century or the beginning of the seventh, hagiographical sources already present a stylized account of ecclesiastical penance in which even apparently quite precise details concerning the administration of penitential discipline have become part of the hagiographer's spiritual message.

### CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most valuable lesson which the study of penance in Byzantine hagiography has to teach is that the Lives of the saints are not to be taken by the church historian as simply providing him with reflections of everyday religious life and practice *prises sur le vif*. The pervasiveness of the *topoi* affects the work of even the most candid

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32. The anxiety of the woman not to «leave anything out» from her confession may be remarked in passing: *Vita Basilii* 12 (BHG 258) ed. Combefis, p. 216A-B. This, as much as the shame of revealing her sins, seems to be the point of a *written* confession as the reference to 1 *Tim.* 2:4 makes clear.

33. Forgiveness is conceived here as the expiation of one's sins and the reception of an assurance that one's penance has been accepted by God: πῶς δὲ καὶ πληροφορηθῶ, ὅτι μετανοούσων δέχεται με ὁ Θεός; The general assurance first given by Basil that all true conversion is followed by divine forgiveness is not adequate: *Vita Basilii* 12 (BHG 258) ed. Combefis, p. 218A-B.

among Byzantine hagiographers and the narrative limitations of the genre also conspire to frustrate many modern interests. In the particular case of the history of penance, the very fact that *μετάνοια* is central to the monastic vision of life means that at least some element of conscious exhortation, and therefore perhaps of deformation, will almost always be present in the description of penitential cases and practice.

This conclusion is, nevertheless, grounds for caution only, not for despair. Familiarity with the widest possible range of saints' Lives and an acquired sensitivity to *topoi* and narrative technique will enable the historian to reach a balanced judgement about what he can and cannot extract from the *Vitae* for his own purposes. He will court certain and perhaps fatal danger in his use of the Lives, however, if he only skims off the «best» of them — the Life of a Theodore of Sykeon in the seventh century or a Joannicius in the ninth and draws general conclusions on the basis of what he finds there.<sup>34</sup> In the domain of penance that kind of selection would be profoundly misleading, for it is a plain fact most of the pre-Metaphrastic Lives contain no evidence relevant to ecclesiastical penance, and the picture of penance as it emerges from such extraordinary *Vitae* is by no means typical of the evidence of the hagiographical genre as a whole.

Thus, enthusiasm for the *Vitae sanctorum* as a unique kind of historical source in the study of Byzantine religious history must be tempered by a healthy dose of realism. The Lives of the saints have their own «distorting mirror», a caution which has particular relevance to future historians of Byzantine pastoral care.

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34. The study by J. Seiber, *The Urban Saint in Early Byzantine Social History*, Oxford 1977, is less cogent in many points of detail because of its restricted choice of only the «best» hagiographical texts.