The Penitential of Finnian (late 6th century)

The purpose of penance is to reconcile the repentant sinner with God. In early Christian practice, penance was public, dramatic, and humiliating. But within the Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Frankish worlds a different sort of penance became popular: the “tariffed,” private penance of the penitentials. Drawing on Biblical passages, canons of early church councils, monastic practices, and perhaps secular laws, these penitentials listed sins and the penances due for them (the tariffs) as a matter of regular religious discipline. The penitential of Finnian (originally in Latin) is one of the earliest such texts. Although most likely created in a monastic context, it was directed mainly to the laity rather than monks.


In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

1. If anyone has sinned in the thoughts of his heart and immediately repents, he shall beat his breast and seek pardon from God and make satisfaction, that he may be whole.

2. But if he has frequently entertained [evil] thoughts and hesitated to act on them, whether he has mastered them or been mastered by them, he shall seek pardon from God by prayer and fasting day and night until the evil thought departs and he is whole.

3. If anyone has thought evil and intended to do it, but opportunity has failed him, it is the same sin but not the same penalty; for example, if he intended fornication or murder, since the deed did not complete the intention he has, to be sure, sinned in his heart, but if he quickly does penance, he can be helped. This penance of his is half a year on an allowance, and he shall abstain from wine and meats for a whole year.

4. If anyone has sinned in word by an inadvertence and immediately repented, and has not said any such thing of set purpose, he ought to submit to penance, but he shall keep a special fast; moreover, thereafter let him be on his guard throughout his life, lest he commit further sin.

5. If one of the clerics or ministers of God makes strife, he shall do penance for a week with bread and water and seek pardon from God and his neighbor, with full confession and humility; and thus can he be reconciled to God and his neighbor.

6. If anyone has started a quarrel and plotted in his heart to strike or kill his neighbor, if [the offender] is a cleric, he shall do penance for half a year with an allowance of bread and water and for a whole year abstain from wine and meats, and thus he will be reconciled to the altar.

7. But if he is a layman, he shall do penance for a week, since he is a man of this world and his guilt is lighter in this world and his reward less in the world to come.

8. But if he is a cleric and strikes his brother or his neighbor or sheds blood, it is the same as if he had killed him, but the penance is not the same. He shall do penance with bread and
water and be deprived of his clerical office for an entire year, and he must pray for himself with weeping and tears, that he may obtain mercy of God, since the Scripture says: “Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer,” how much more he who strikes him.

9. But if he is a layman, he shall do penance forty days and give some money to him whom he struck, according as some priest or judge determines. A cleric, however, ought not to give money, either to the one or to the other (?).

10. But if one who is a cleric falls miserably through fornication he shall lose his place of honor, and if it happens once [only] and it is concealed from men but known before God, he shall do penance for an entire year with an allowance of bread and water and for two years abstain from wine and meats, but he shall not lose his clerical office. For, we say, sins are to be absolved in secret by penance and by very diligent devotion of heart and body.

11. If, however, he has long been in the habit of sin and it has not come to the notice of men, he shall do penance for three years with bread and water and lose his clerical office, and for three years more he shall abstain from wine and meats, since it is not a smaller thing to sin before God than before men.

12. But if one of the clerical orders falls to the depth of ruin and begets a son and kills him, great is the crime of fornication with homicide, but it can be expiated through penance and mercy. He shall do penance three years with an allowance of bread and water, in weeping and tears, and prayers by day and night, and shall implore the mercy of the Lord, if he may perchance have remission of sins; and shall abstain for three years from wine and meats, deprived of the services of the clergy, and for a forty-day period in the last three years he shall fast with bread and water; and [he shall] be an exile in his own country, until a period of seven years is completed. And so by the judgment of a bishop or a priest he shall be restored to his office.

13. If, however, he has not killed the child, the sin is less, but the penance is the same.

14. But if one of the clerical order is on familiar terms with any woman and he has himself done no evil with her, whether by cohabiting with her or by lascivious embraces, this is penance: For such time as he has done this he shall withdraw from the communion of the altar and do penance for forty days and nights with bread and water and cast out of his heart his fellowship with the woman, and so be restored to the altar.

15. If however he is on familiar terms with many women and has given himself to association with them and to their lascivious embraces, but has, as he says, preserved himself from ruin, he shall do penance for half a year with an allowance of bread and water, and for another half year he shall abstain from wine and meats and he shall not surrender his clerical office; and after an entire year of penance, he shall join himself to the altar.

16. If any cleric lusts after a virgin or any woman in heart but does not utter [his wish] with the lips, if he sins thus but once he ought to do penance for seven days with an allowance of bread and water.

17. But if he continually lust and is unable to indulge his desire, since the woman does not permit him or since he is ashamed to speak, still he has committed adultery with her in his heart. It is the same sin though it be in the heart and not in the body; yet the penance is not the same. This is his penance: let him do penance for forty days with bread and water.
18. If any cleric or woman who practices magic misleads anyone by the magic, it is a monstrous sin, but [a sin that] can be expiated by penance. Such an offender shall do penance for six years, three years on an allowance of bread and water, and during the remaining years he shall abstain from wine and meats.

19. If, however, such a person does not mislead anyone but gives [a potion] for the sake of wanton love to some one, he shall do penance for an entire year on an allowance of bread and water.

20. If some woman by her magic misleads any woman with respect to the birth of a child, she shall do penance for half a year with an allowance of bread and water and abstain for two years from wine and meats and fast for six forty-day periods with bread and water.

21. But if, as we have said, she bears a child and her sin is manifest, she shall do penance for six years with bread and water (as is the judgment in the case of a cleric) and in the seventh year she shall be joined to the altar; and then we say her honor can be restored and she should don a white robe and be pronounced a virgin. So a cleric who has fallen ought likewise to receive the clerical office in the seventh year after the labor of penance, as saith the Scripture: “Seven times a just man falleth and ariseth,” that is, after seven years of penance he who fell can be called “just,” and in the eight year evil shall not lay hold on him. But for the remainder [of his life] let him preserve himself carefully lest he fall; since, as Solomon saith, as a dog returning to his vomit becomes odious, so is he who through his own negligence reverts to his sin.

22. But if one has sworn a false oath, great is the crime, and it can hardly, if at all, be expiated; but none the less it is better to do penance and not to despair: great is the mercy of God. This is his penance: first, he must never in his life take an oath, since a man who swears much will not be justified and “the scourge shall not depart from his house.” But the medicine of immediate penance in the present time is needful to prevent perpetual pains in the future; and [it is needful] to do penance for seven years and for the rest of one’s life to do right, not to take oaths, and to set free one’s maidservant or man servant or to give the value of one [servant] to the poor or needy.

23. If any cleric commits murder and kills his neighbor and he is dead, he must become an exile for ten years and do penance seven years in another region. He shall do penance for three years of this time on an allowance of bread and water, and he shall fast three forty-day periods on an allowance of bread and water and for four years abstain from wine and meats; and having thus completed the ten years, if he has done well and is approved by testimonial of the abbot or priest to whom he was committed, he shall be received into his own country and make satisfaction to the friends of him whom he slew, and he shall render to his father or mother, if they are still in the flesh, compensation for the filial piety and obedience [of the murdered man] and say: “Lo, I will do for you whatever you ask, in the place of your son.” But if he has not done enough he shall not be received back forever.

24. But if he killed him suddenly and not from hatred – the two having formerly been friends – but by the prompting of the devil, through an inadvertence, he shall do penance for three years on an allowance of bread and water, and for three more years he shall abstain from wine and meats; but he shall not remain in his own country.

25. If a cleric commits theft once or twice, that is, steals his neighbor’s sheep or hog or any animal, he shall do penance an entire year
on an allowance of bread and water and shall restore fourfold to his neighbor.

26. If, however, he does it, not once or twice, but of long habit, he shall do penance for three years.

27. If anyone who formerly was a layman, has become a cleric, a deacon, or one of any rank, and if he lives with his sons and daughters and if he returns to carnal desire and begets a son with his concubine, or says he has, let him know that he has fallen to the depth of ruin, his sin is not less than it would be if he had been a cleric from his youth and sinned with a strange girl, since they have sinned after his vow and after they were consecrated to God, and then they have made the vow void. He shall do penance for three years on an allowance of bread and water and shall abstain for three years more from wine and meats, not together, but separately, and then in the seventh year [such clerical offenders] shall be joined [to the altar] and shall receive their rank.

28. But if a cleric is covetous, this is a great offense; covetousness is pronounced idolatry, but it can be corrected by liberality and alms. This is the penance for his offense, that he cure and correct contraries by contraries.

29. If a cleric is wrathful or envious or backbiting, gloomy or greedy, great and capital sins are these; and they slay the soul and cast it down to the depth of hell. But there is this penance for them, until they are plucked forth and eradicated from our hearts: through the help of the Lord and through our own zeal and activity let us seek the mercy of the lord and victory in these things; and we shall continue in weeping and tears day and night so long as these things are turned over in our heart. But by contraries, as we said, let us make haste to cure contraries and to cleanse away the faults from our hearts and introduce virtues in their places. Patience must arise for wrathfulness; kindliness, or the love of God and of one's neighbor, for envy; for detraction, restraint of heart and tongue; for dejection, spiritual joy; for greed, liberality; as saith the Scripture: “The anger of man worketh not the justice of God”, and envy is judged as leprosy by the law. Detraction is anathematized in the Scriptures; “He that detracteth his brother shall be cast out of the land of the living. Gloom devouris or consumes the soul. Covetousness is “the root of all evil,” as saith the Apostle.

30. If any cleric under the false pretense of the redemption of captives is found out and proved to be despoiling churches and monasteries, until is confounded, if he has been a “conversus,” he shall do penance for an entire year on an allowance of bread and water and all the goods which were found with him of those things which he had gathered shall be paid out and lent to the poor: for two years he shall abstain from wine and meat.

31. We require and encourage contributing for the redemption of captives; by the teaching of the Church, money is to be lent to the poor and needy.

32. But if he has been a “conversus” he is to be excommunicated and be anathema to all Christians and be driven from the bounds of his country and beaten with rods until he is converted, — if he has compunction.

33. We are obliged to serve the churches of the saints as we have ability and to suffer with all who are placed in necessity. Pilgrims are to be received into our houses, as the lord has written; the infirm are to be visited; those who are cast into chains are to be ministered to; and all things commanded of Christ are to be performed, from the greatest unto the least.

34. If any man or woman is nigh unto death, although he (or she) has been a sinner and
pleads for the communion of Christ we say that it is not to be denied to him if he promise to take the vow, and let him do well and he shall be received by Him. If he becomes a novice let him fulfill in this world that which he has vowed to God. But if he does not fulfill the vow which he has vowed to God, [the consequences] will be on his own head. As for us, we will not refuse what we owe to him: we are not to cease to snatch prey from the mouth of the lion or the dragon, that is of the devil, who ceases not to snatch at the prey of our souls; we may follow up and strive [for his soul] at the very end of a man’s life.

35. If one of the laity is converted from his evil-doing unto the Lord, and if he has previously wrought every evil deed, that is, the committing of fornication and the shedding of blood, he shall do penance for three years and go unarmed except for a staff in his hand, and shall not live with his wife. But in the first years he shall do penance on an allowance of bread and water and not live with his wife. After a penance of three years he shall give money for the redemption of his soul and the fruit of repentance into the hand of the priest and make a feast for the servants of God, and in the feast [his penance] shall be ended; and he shall be received to communion and shall resume relations with his wife after an entire and complete penance, and if it is satisfactory he shall be joined to the altar.