‘For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God’: Contraction, Confession, and Satisfaction in Baroque Painting

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Introduction

The centrality of the idea of penance in seventeenth century Catholicism found expression in paintings of the time in a broad range of subjects. The deep feelings discernable in the devotional works of art of that period, which focus on penance, reflect the culmination of the religious, spiritual, and political development undergone by Catholics after the council of Trent (1545-1563).

One of the most popular scenes relating to penance was that of a penitent saint in solitude. The artists of the seventeenth century remained within the well-codified pictorial tradition evident in sixteenth century depictions of such scenes. They continued to render the saints alone in the wilderness, with only their personal attributes to accompany them – St. Peter’s keys, St. Jerome’s lion or Mary Magdalene’s jar – clad in very scant clothing that usually covered only part of their bodies and with bare feet. In this traditional scheme, the devotional saint concentrates on his ritual act, recognizable through expressive hand gestures, sorrowful facial expressions, and symbolic objects such as a crucifix, a skull and a whip. In this regard, one should mention Cesare Ripa’s model of the penitent, as defined in his Iconologia, first published in 1593, but extended and illustrated in the third edition published in Rome ten years later.2 Ripa based himself on traditional presentations of penitent saints. To mention only two of the better-known examples from the Renaissance, one should point out Leonardo da Vinci’s unfinished St. Jerome, 1481 (Pinacoteca Capitolina, Rome) and Titian’s Mary Magdalene, c. 1530 (Palazzo Pitti, Florence).3

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1 The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans 3:23.
3 In regard to the fact that Titian rendered his Mary Magdalene naked, it is
In seventeenth century high art, however, there is a discernible trend which goes beyond Cesare Ripa’s broad definition of the penitent saint. Now, the ritual aspects of the sacrament of penance were emphasized by special iconographic motifs that address each component of the three stages of penance separately. This emerges from a careful examination of the many post-Trent artistic representations of the devotional saint in solitude and, as far as I can tell, has never been discussed before in modern scholarship.

Penance (poenitentiae) is one of Catholicism’s seven sacraments. Its concept is anchored in the words and sermons of Jesus in the New Testament, such as the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke, 15, 1-32).4

interesting to note that in the seventeenth century, it was common to depict the saint naked. This was an accepted iconography. In his 1625 Musaeum, Cardinal Federico Borromeo, nephew of St. Carlo Borromeo, even praised Titian’s nude Magdalene:

The other paintings that are seen leave no doubt as to the author. They are by Titian and among them stands out the Magdalene with her hair flowing down the length of her person, of which there exist many copies. In this painting one must admire exceedingly the fact that the artist knew how to maintain an honest appearance in a nude.


It has three stages: contrition through prayer (De contritione); confession of sins to an ordained priest (De confessione); and satisfaction in the manner laid down by the priest-confessor (De satisfactionis necessitate et fructu). Essentially, the sacrament is intended to turn the believer from evil ways by means of contrition and confession of sins on the one hand, and absolution through satisfaction on the other, in order to prepare him for salvation in the hereafter.\(^5\)

The idea embodied in the sacrament of penance touches each and every Christian who, having erred, is able to return to the Church’s fold at any time in the course of a lifetime, once having recognized those errors and acknowledged a personal faith and its truth. Since there is no one capable of living an entire life without ever violating at least one of the principles or laws of Christianity, and since the road to salvation entails purgation of sins, it was decided already at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) that each Christian is bound to perform the sacrament of penance at least once a year.\(^6\)

Despite the unequivocal determinations of the Fourth Lateran Council as to the manner in which penance should be performed, the sacrament enjoyed very little public compliance until the Council of Trent. There were two apparent reasons for this: firstly, the personal familiarity required between priest and penitent led to the discomfort of sinners at having to share their darkest secrets with a familiar priest, when they knew that the priest was probably as great a sinner as they were; and secondly, fear of the harsh punishments meted out to penitents by the

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\(^6\) The decision to command believers to take an active role in fulfilling their religious duty, and to perform the sacrament of Penance at least once a year, originated at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. The Council’s decision reads:

> All the faithful of either sex, after they have reached the age of discernment, should individually confess all their sins in a faithful manner to their own priest at least once a year and let them take care to do what they can to perform the penance imposed on them.

Inquisition. It is no coincidence that Martin Luther’s first attacks in his ninety-five theses, which he tacked up on the door of the castle church of Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, focused on penance. His harshest strictures were reserved for the heads of the Church who were berated for the arbitrary manner, unconnected to any Christian tenets, in which they granted absolution, chiefly on a pecuniary basis. The participants in the Council of Trent were clearly aware of these facts and also of the problematic social standing of the clergy, who were ordained to perform this purgation and to grant absolution in the name of Jesus. The Protestants were angered by the ignorance of lower-level priests in small communities. Therefore, parallel to the decisions on the enforcement of the sacrament of penance, the Catholics decided to impose much greater supervision upon the lower clergy. Bishops were to visit each of their churches at least once a year, to live in their diocese and to pay more attention to everything to do with Church discipline and hierarchy. Strict criteria were set for acceptance as a preacher. Candidates had to have sufficient means to maintain themselves, as well as knowledge of Latin and theology. The goal was to improve the image of the priesthood, which had become greatly tarnished over time.

It was this direct attack by the Protestants which led the leaders of the Catholic Church, as part of their reform, to reemphasize the importance and centrality of the sacrament of penance by accentuating each of its components separately. The notion of penance as a basic prerequisite to salvation was expressed in contemporary writings, such as those of Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), Pope Clement VIII’s famous theologian and one of the greatest minds of seventeenth century theology. In The Art of Dying Well (Book I, Chapter XIII) Bellarmine emphasizes the need for sincerity in contrition, full and detailed confessions, and

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7 For Luther’s ninety five theses, see B. J. Kidd, Documents Illustrative of the Continental Reformation, Oxford 1911, pp. 21-26; M. Brecht, Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521, Philadelphia 1985, pp. 190-202. On Luther’s attack on indulgences and his Justification by Faith, see Pelikan (above, n. 5), pp. 136-150.

8 J. Delumeau, Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire: A New View of the Counter-Reformation, London 1977), p. 20; Haliczer (above, n. 5), pp. 8-10. Mâle (above, n. 4), pp. 66-67, mentions a hierarchy that evolved regarding the seven sacraments, with penance being the most popular theme in painting.

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absolution, as essential steps on the path to salvation. Bellarmine also explains (Book II, Chapter VI) that the last act a person must perform before dying is the sacrament of penance.

On a purely political level, the direct contact between priest and believer, based on the duty of the believers to present themselves before their pastor at least once a year and to describe their sins, must have appealed to the participants in the Council of Trent. In an era in which the heads of the Catholic Church found themselves fighting to hold on to their diminishing centers of power, the political aspect of this sacrament was very important. The Catholics of the sixteenth century witnessed how their great adversaries, the Protestants, were being successful in attracting and taking over entire nations. We must not forget the two reasons for the convening of the Council of Trent: to ensure that Christians who had not yet joined the Protestants refrain from doing so in the future; and to bring those who had forsaken the Church back to the fold. The sacrament of penance had the distinct potential of serving to attain both objectives. First, by introducing patterns of active contrition into the community of faithful Catholics, the leaders of the Church hoped to stem the flow of desertion to the ranks of the Protestants. Secondly, by propagandizing penance, they hoped to bring about the return to the true Church of those who had already deserted. The sacrament of penance was seen as vital in bolstering religious control over those areas that were still under Catholic hegemony, as well as in confronting the Protestants.

The political quality of the sacramental components of penance, and especially the stage of confession, was highly valued. At the fourteenth session of the Council of Trent, which was devoted to the sacrament of penance, a comparison was drawn between a father
confessor and a physician: To help a patient, a doctor must hear details about all the patient’s ailments or he will not be able to make a correct diagnosis and heal the sick person. Similarly, the penitent is obliged to make a detailed and full confession, so that absolution may be complete.\textsuperscript{12} The priest gains a wealth of information toward a deep knowledge of, and great influence over the penitent.\textsuperscript{13} The Council not only imposed upon the priest the task of getting to know each believer personally, but also empowered him to show penitents the way to atone for their sins and to win absolution.\textsuperscript{14}

The great potential for power and influence inherent in the sacrament of Penance is indisputable. It is therefore no great surprise that in the post-Trent era, a new awareness of the penitent saint emerges, a subject which never before had received such attention. The growing numbers of paintings where the penitent saint is the central figure is a clear indication of the profound interest in the concept of penance, which should be seen in the context of the dogmatic Catholic aspiration to reunite all Christians under the rule of the pope. At the beginning of the seventeenth century the calls for reunification became louder, due to the confidence of the Catholic leaders in their power to defeat the Protestant challenge. The call was for all Christians to renounce their evil deeds and repent, not only those who had remained Catholics, but also those who once were part of the Church, but had taken a new religious path and joined the Protestants.

The political implications of Penance could not have escaped the attention of seventeenth century artists. It is reasonable to assume that

\textsuperscript{12} Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, vol. 2, p. 706.
\textsuperscript{13} On the influence priest-confessors wielded over penitents, see Haliczer (above, n. 5), p. 25. Following the Council of Trent, priests were required to press their congregations to carry out the sacrament of penance. This necessitated personal acquaintance with them. From 1614 on, priests were required to make lists of the worthy and unworthy members of their congregation. See L. Nussdorfer, Civic Politics in the Rome of Urban VIII, Princeton 1992, p. 24.
they learned about them from the weekly sermons of the preachers of their own communities, as well as from devotional didactic literature, which was fairly accessible. Whatever sources artists used, the popularity of artistic representations of saints performing the sacrament of penance increased towards the end of the sixteenth century and reached a peak during the first half of the seventeenth century. And in parallel, the three stages of the sacrament were increasingly differentiated by special iconographic motifs – which were present in earlier works on penance but were not as clearly emphasized – as representing contrition, confession and satisfaction.

Following is a brief outline, with some examples, of the most common characteristics of the three stages of the sacrament of penance as they emerge in seventeenth century high art.

**Contrition**

In the first sacramental stage of penance, believers had to feel a true remorse for their evils deeds and were expected to wash away their guilty conscious by wholeheartedly crying and praying. Cardinal Bellarmine explicitly remarks upon the importance of the sincere feelings of remorse that are evident in a believer who weeps tearfully, showing that his feelings of contrition are genuine.15 Bellarmine emphasizes a perception already evident in the words of St. Ambrose, who mentions St. Peter’s weeping, and addresses the reader with a direct question about his feelings of contrition: ‘Good are the tears which wash away guilt. Peter wept bitterly that by his tears he might be able to wash away his transgression; and do you, if you wish to deserve forgiveness, wash away your guilt by tears?’16

For this stage, painters depicted saints that are first and foremost weeping, with tears in their eyes, agonized facial expression, heads tilted sideway, gazing heavenward, and kerchiefs in their hands. There is also a hand gesture exclusively signifying contrition: clasping hands with interlocked fingers, a gesture defined by John Bulwer in his 1644 *Chirologia* as signifying weeping (*ploro*).17 Two of the saints most

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15 Bellarmine (above, n. 9), p. 290.
17 For the visual representation of *ploro*, see J. Bulwer, *Chirologia: or the Natural
commonly depicted in contrition were Mary Magdalene and St. Peter. Mary Magdalene, because it was she, more than any other saint, who traveled the long road from a life of sin to holiness. From being a prostitute, on the lowest rung of human society, she became the person who stood by Jesus’ side when he was crucified, and the first to have the privilege of meeting him after he ascended to heaven. St. Peter was popular in this context because of his regret for his denial of Jesus, as described in the New Testament. Jesus tells St. Peter that he will deny him three times in the course of the night of Jesus’ arrest, and this is what occurs. After St. Peter follows the men who captured his master and stands under the window of his prison with a group of men who light a fire, he is asked several times if he is one of the followers of Jesus and he denies it. When he hears the cock crow, he realizes the correctness of Jesus’ prediction and is overcome by shame and contrition, to the point of weeping.

Tears are the most obvious indication that the saint is in contrition. The tears are an essential condition of the sincerity of the act. An example of a tearful Mary Magdalene in the wilderness is Annibale Carracci’s depiction of the saint from 1599 (Figure 1). In this painting, Mary Magdalene, wearing very simple clothes that cover her body only from the waist down, sits on the ground with her left hand on a


20 This was perhaps the reason that St. Peter, not the subject of many visual representations in earlier centuries, became a very popular figure in the art of the seventeenth century. See Mâle (above, n. 4), pp. 48-54; P. Perkins, Peter Apostle for the Whole Church, Columbia SC 1994, p. 6; Mormando (above, n. 18), p. 123.
skull, and her head resting on her right hand. She is crying, her sad gaze is directed towards heaven. A tear is also visible in Guercino’s 1639 St. Peter (National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh). The crying saint is holding his hands together with interlocking fingers, gazing towards heaven with a sorrowful expression on his face. In the background is the Castel Sant’ Angelo in Rome, the site confirming that the saint is indeed St. Peter.

Crying can be indicated by the presence of a kerchief, as in Guercino’s The Penitent St. Peter (Cassa di Risparmio, Bologna), from 1650. St. Peter is alone, the upper half of his body bare, with a simple cloth covering his lower body. He gazes towards heaven with tearful eyes in the same manner as in the painting in Edinburgh, but his hand gestures are different. In his left hand he holds a kerchief and in his right hand

21 L. Salerno, I Dipinti del Guercino, Rome 1988, cat. no. 179.
22 Salerno, cat. no. 269.
he holds his keys. The kerchief in his hand accentuates the sincerity of his contrition. The fact that he is represented as an ascetic monk, uncovered from his loins up, is another indication of the sincerity of his emotions. 23

A good example of the depiction of saints in contrition clasping their hands together with interlocked fingers is Domenichino’s *Mary Magdalene* from circa 1625 (Figure 2). Domenichino placed his subject in solitude, still wearing her beautiful dress, in the wilderness, sitting on the ground, her hands together on a stone altar. She is awake, with a remorseful expression, tilted head and heavenward gaze. Another example of this motif is Annibale’s 1585-1586 *Mary Magdalene* (Denis Mahon Collection, London). 24 In the painting, Mary is seated on the ground against a wild landscape. Before her are her open prayer book, which rests on a skull, and the jar of ointment. She is turning her head to the side, towards a crucifix that is tied to a tree. Her hands are clasped together with interlocked fingers.

The interlocked fingers, together with a remorseful expression and a gaze towards heaven, are also present in depictions of St. Peter in contrition by El Greco and Ribera. In El Greco’s *St. Peter*, 1598 (Figure 3), the saint’s keys are tied to his left hand. In Ribera’s *St. Peter* from 1639 (The Hermitage, St. Petersburg) the saint leans on his left elbow with hands clasped together and interlocked fingers. In addition to Mary Magdalene and St. Peter, both St. Francis and St. Jerome were also depicted in contrition, as indicated by their clasped hands and interlocked fingers. 25 In a Guercino painting from 1659 (today in a private collection in Milan), St. Francis is standing in front of an altar in the wilderness, looking down at the crucifix on the

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23 The models for renditions of half-naked saints are the hermits who choose to live in poverty, dispensing with earthly possessions (*nuditas temporalis*). See E. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, New York 1967, p. 156.


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Figure 2
Domenichino, *Mary Magdalene*, c. 1625
Photograph courtesy of National Gallery of Ireland

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Figure 3
El Greco, *Penitent St. Peter*, 1598
San Diego Museum of Art (Gift of Anne R. and Amy Putnam)
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altar. Bartolomeo Schedoni depicted St. Jerome in 1605-1607 (Museo e Gallerie Nazionali di Capodimonte, Naples), gazing towards heaven against a background of wilderness. He does not seem to notice the cherub next to him.

**Confession**

The second sacramental stage of penance is characterized by a conversation in which believers confess all their sins to an ordained priest. St. Thomas Aquinas, who was born after the Fourth Lateran Council and who had a profound influence on the clergy of the post-Trent era, emphasized the divine imperative of penance because it served as a remedy for sins committed after baptism. He stressed the importance of the priest’s acquiring full knowledge of his flock ‘lest a wolf may hide therein’. It was particularly important to confess to one’s own pastor, rather than just any priest, for only he ‘can bind the penitent to do something’, and thereby grant absolution.

In paintings of penitent saints, the indication that they are confessing

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26 D. Mahon, M. Pulini and V. Sgarbi eds., *Guercino Poesia e Sentimento nella Pittura del’600*, Rome 2003, cat. no. 50.
27 Delumeau (above, n. 5), p. 198, points out that the writings of Thomas Aquinas on penance became official Church doctrine. He is quoted widely in sixteenth century literature. A relevant example is his decisive influence over Gabriele Paleotti, as evinced in the multiplicity of quotations from him in Paleotti’s writings. See also P. Barocchi ed., *Trattati d’arte del Cinquecento: fra Manierismo e Controriforma*, 3 vols., Bari 1960-1962.

> I answer that, We are bound to confession on two counts: first by the Divine law, from the very fact that confession is a remedy, and in this way not all are bound to confession, but those only who fall into mortal sin after Baptism; secondly, by a precept of positive law, and in this way all are bound by the precept of the Church laid down in the general council under Innocent III, both in order that everyone may acknowledge himself to be a sinner, because all have sinned and need the grace of God (Rom. iii. 23); and that the Eucharist may be approached with greater reverence; and lastly, that parish priests may know their flock, lest a wolf may hide therein.

29 See Aquinas, vol. 18, Supplement, Q. 8, article 4:

> Therefore confession should be made not only to a priest, but to one’s own priest; for since a priest does not absolve a man except by binding him to do something, he alone can absolve, who, by his command, can bind the penitent to do something.
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is that they are actively engaged in an animated conversation with their confessors. This was achieved by representing them either staring at a crucifix with very expressive hand gestures, which indicate that they are talking, or holding a crucifix in one hand and gazing at it while gesturing with the other. The most common hand gestures in this case would be pointing toward the heart. Sometimes the saints were depicted with another sacred figure – either an angel or another saint. In these cases, too, their hands are very expressive.

The saints most commonly depicted at this stage were Mary Magdalene and St. Francis. The justification for choosing St. Francis as an exemplar of confession can be found in Thomas of Celano’s early biography, where he describes Francis’s repentance, emphasizing his grief over his misbehavior in his youth and his awareness of the importance of penance for the redemption of the soul. In his first life of St. Francis, Celano describes in detail how St. Francis looked for a place to pray, how he remained there for a long time, confessing to himself (and to the Lord) ‘the bitterness of his soul’, pleading ‘O God, be merciful to me the sinner’, and how happy and relieved he was afterward.30

An early example of a painting depicting a confessing saint is


One day, when he was wondering over the mercy of the Lord with regard to the gifts bestowed upon him, he wished that the course of his own life and that of his brothers might be shown him by the Lord; he sought out a place of prayer, as he had done so often, and he persevered there for a long time with fear and trembling standing before the Lord of the whole earth, and he thought in the bitterness of his soul of the years he had spent wretchedly, frequently repeating this word: O God, be merciful to me the sinner. Little by little a certain unspeakable joy and very great sweetness began to flood his innermost heart. He began also to stand aloof from himself, and, as his feelings were checked and the darkness that had gathered in his heart because of his fear of sin dispelled, there was poured into him a certainty that all his sins had been forgiven and a confidence of his restoration to grace was given him. He was then caught up above himself, and absorbed in a certain light; the capacity of his mind was enlarged and he could see clearly what was to come to pass. When this sweetness finally passed, along with the light, renewed in spirit, he seemed changed into another man.

On the penitence of St. Francis, see also R. C. Trexler, Naked Before the Father; The Renunciation of Francis of Assisi, New York 1989, pp. 53-57.
Annibale Carracci’s portrayal of St. Francis, 1584-1585 (Pinacoteca Capitolina, Rome).\(^3\) St. Francis is depicted from his waist up, in solitude against a background of wilderness, wearing a patched Franciscan robe. He is looking downward at a crucifix leaning on a skull. The saint’s stigmatized hands are pointed towards his chest as if he has just emptied his heart with a full confession.\(^2\) Another St. Francis pointing at his chest is that of Guido Reni. In St. Francis, 1620-1621 (Chiesa dei Gerolamini, Naples), the saint is in solitude against a background of wilderness, gazing towards heaven and pointing to his heart, but only with his right hand.\(^3\) A third example is Zurbarán’s St. Francis from 1659 (Figure 4). St. Francis, against a very dark background, is also pointing to his chest while gazing towards heaven.

In his Mary Magdalene from 1638 (Figure 5), Guido Reni depicts the subject in the same way as he rendered St. Francis, with her right hand indicating her chest and looking upwards, but she is holding a small cross in her left hand on top of a skull while St. Francis is not. Orazio Gentileschi’s Mary Magdalene from circa 1615 (Santa Maria Maddalena, Fabriano) also holds a crucifix in her right hand while her left hand gestures expressively, with a sorrowful facial expression and tears.\(^4\) The crucifix seems to have been leaning on the skull before Mary Magdalene actually took it in her hand.\(^5\)

In some works the holding of a cross or a crucifix is emphasized together with the other typical motifs, in representations of the confession stage of penance. For example, In Guercino’s St. Francis from circa 1645 (Private Collection), the saint converses with a crucifix which he

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32 Next to the skull there is a letter with an inscription and a closed book. The inscription reads: ‘ABSIT MIHI GLORIARI NISI IN CRUCE DOMINI MEI, IN QUA EST SALUS, VITA ET RESURRECTIO NOSTRA’. For its sources, see Posner, vol. 2, p. 11.
35 On the symbolic meaning of a crucifix that leans on a skull, see Unger (above, n. 25), pp. 392-393.
Figure 4
Zurbarán, *St. Francis*, 1659
Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Munich
holds in his right hand. His open left hand and his gaze in the direction of the crucifix suggest that he is saying something. His prayer book is open, although it is clear that he is not reading from it because he leans the crucifix on the book. Another example is Matteo Loves’s

36 Salerno (above, n. 21), cat. no. 224 bis.
Mary Magdalene from the 1620s (Cavallini Sgarbi Foundation, Ferrara). In this case, the saint is holding the crucifix in her left hand. She puts her right hand on her heart, in the same way as Annibale represented his St. Francis, and also gazes at the crucifix in the same way. Loves’s Mary Magdalene has a big tear under her left eye which might have suggested contrition. Yet, her hand gestures together with her gaze at the crucifix make it clear that her deed is that of confession.

One of the most outstanding representations of a saint confessing his sins is Guercino’s 1647 St. Peter Standing before the Madonna (Figure 6). Here, St. Peter wiping his eyes with a kerchief, stands before the seated Madonna bowing his head slightly toward her. She looks at him with an expression full of pity and sympathy, and appears to be listening to him. She, too, holds a kerchief in her folded hands, which rest on her lap. Her interlocked fingers indicate, in my opinion, her total acceptance of St. Peter’s words. The work is unusual, and at first glance its central theme is not clear. On the one hand, St. Peter appears in a posture typical of contrition, all the symbols of which are

Figure 6
Guercino, St. Peter Standing before the Madonna, 1647, Louvre, Paris
(photo: Lessing Company)

37 Mahon, Pulini, and Sgarbi (above, n. 26), cat. no. 56.
present: the melancholic facial expression, the tears and the kerchief. On the other hand, he is not alone, but is standing before the Madonna, whose posture and expression imply that she is listening to his confession. While Guercino has given her a halo, St. Peter is, astonishingly, without one. I believe that this distinction emphasizes their relative status. The confessing St. Peter is depicted as a corporeal, earthly figure, while Mary is, in contrast, a celestial and spiritual figure, one who has already ascended to Heaven and as such cannot be seen in a realistic form by St. Peter. That she is seated on the object resembling the altar before which he is praying intently, may indicate that he is imagining her presence.

Cesare Gennari also depicted Mary Magdalene confessing her sins to an imagined divinity in circa 1662 (Pinacoteca Civica, Cento). Mary Magdalene turns her head from the altar towards a cherub in heaven. She is in the wilderness, half naked, next to a stone altar with a crucifix and an open prayer book. Her open mouth and her expressive hand gestures suggest that she is conversing with him.

Satisfaction

The third sacramental stage of penance, the stage of satisfaction, is that of atonement. The sinner was expected to compensate for his misdeeds. The way this stage was represented was to show a self-flagellating saint beating himself with a stone or whipping himself with a dry root. The torment of the flesh is what the third stage is all about.

Together with Mary Magdalene, one of the saints most commonly represented at this stage was St. Jerome, perhaps because he famously chose his own punishment – an exile of two years in the Syrian Desert (374-376) – in order to be purged of his sins. According to Cardinal Cesare Baronio (1538-1607), the seventeenth century historian of the church, St. Jerome took a vow of seclusion and abstinence after he had his first revelation – a dream of his sinful interest in pagan script – that occurred during his journey to the East.

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St. Jerome, as a saint who had performed atonement, received much attention in Renaissance painting, and thus seventeenth century representations of him at that stage are not unique. Piero Della Francesca, Leonardo da Vinci, and Titian, to mention only few, rendered the saint in the same manner with a stone in his hand in the act of self-flagellation.\footnote{For Renaissance perception of St. Jerome atoning for his misbehavior, see M. Meiss, *The Painter’s Choice: Problems in the Interpretation of Renaissance Art*, New York 1976, p. 197.} One representation in the seventeenth century was that of Ribera from 1633 (Figure 7), who depicted the saint in the third stage of penance,
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alone against a very dark background, with the stone in his right hand and a skull in his left. Another well-known painting of St. Jerome flagellating himself is George de La Tour’s 1630 work (Figure 8), in which the old saint is depicted with a whip in his right hand and a cross in his left.

Figure 8
George de La Tour, *St. Jerome*, 1630, Musée de Grenoble, Grenoble
(photo: Lessing Company)
As for Mary Magdalene in the act of satisfaction, Guido Cagnacci’s *Penitent Magdalene* (Figure 9) has her seated in the foreground, reclining...
against an unrecognizable building, her head tilted backward and her eyes closed. In her right hand she holds a whip. A skull rests on her bosom. Only the bottom part of her body is covered by a cloth. In Guercino’s 1649 *Penitent Magdalene* (Private Collection, New York), the saint is beating herself with a whip, while kneeling before, and gazing at, a crucifix, placed against a background of rocks and trees.\(^{41}\) She is half dressed, with only a length of thin material around her loins and her left arm.

**Conclusion**

I have attempted to show that the three sacramental stages of penance received much attention in post-Trent art, and that there are clear iconographic distinctions between the representations of saints in contrition, confession, and satisfaction. In the paintings where the message is that of contrition, crying is depicted not only by means of tears, but also by a kerchief or clasped hands with interlocked fingers that indicate *ploro*. The stage of confession was conveyed through hand gestures indicating conversation, or portrayal of the saint with an additional being or the symbols of a being, as the confessor. The message of satisfaction was expressed by portraying the saints flagellating themselves.

The centrality of the theme of penance found expression in a broad range of subjects. The political significance of penance could have been the main motivation behind the creation of these works, especially in a period of religious conflicts. We have seen that penance as a three-stage process was crucial for both the individual believer and the institutional church. For the believer, the sacrament was essential in order to attain complete absolution. For the church it was a powerful tool to gain control over the believers. Each stage of the sacrament had to be emphasized accordingly. The dogmatic Catholic aspiration to reunite all Christians under the rule of the pope was one of the most important motives behind the call for believers to return to the bosom of Rome. This need of the hour was at the core of the establishment of a concrete and distinctive iconography of the penitent saints.

\(^{41}\) Salerno (above, n. 21), cat. no. 264.