from Chaucer's Pilgrims

Chapter 22

And Was a Povre Persoun of a Toun

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Chaucer's pilgrims portray a spectrum of representative Englishmen of the fourteenth century. They also portray universal and timeless human characteristics. Although the group are on a religious pilgrimage, the tone of their traveling companionship is that of a group of strangers who have met on vacation—until the last tale, told by the Parson. Their manners range from the gentility of the Knight and the Prioress to the churlish quarreling and cynicism of such characters as the Miller, the Reeve, the Cook, and the Summoner, and their tales range from romance and classic fabliaux to bawdy comedy. But Chaucer recalls them all to the true purpose of their journey—a pilgrimage not only to a great cathedral and the site of a saint's martyrdom but also to Celestial Jerusalem—by the final tale, a sermon on damnation and salvation, preached by an ideal "religious."

After the withdrawal of Roman control of much of Europe, the Roman Catholic Church gradually assumed responsibility for many civilizing functions. It established and maintained not only religious organizations and instruction, but also law and order, education and economic stability, travel and communication. As secular communities redeveloped into townships, dukedoms, and kingdoms, the religious and secular institutions fought over the jurisdiction of these civilizing functions, and unfortunately, the Church sometimes outdid the secular groups in corrupt motives and methods. Nevertheless, there were always individuals who sought to live by high spiritual standards, and most people maintained a simple faith in the doctrines religion taught.

Sometimes those strongly committed to spiritual values became leaders in reform movements that developed into organizations that served throughout Europe. One such organization was the mendicant order of friars and nuns known as the Dominicans, an order founded in 1215 by the scholarly St. Dominic of

Caloruega, Spain (1170–1221). He and his followers were dedicated to improving the education of the clergy. Thus they increased the number and quality of schools beyond those already established by the Church. Another of the dedicated individuals was St. Francis of Assisi, Italy (1182–1226). Francis and Dominic knew each other and were friends, although sometimes their followers were rivals. Francis sought to counteract the ostentatious wealth of many church dignitaries by emphasizing voluntary poverty and labor. However, his teachings succumbed to the inevitable requirements of institutional development, especially the necessity of raising adequate funds to build and maintain permanent residences, schools, and other places of service. Eventually, men talented in raising charitable contributions but without sincere religious principles—men such as Chaucer's Friar—corrupted the group's work.

Still another originally well-intentioned but ultimately abused practice was the assignment of offices and the bestowal of benefices (land held by a feudal lord or the Church and the church and parish which this land included, for the sake of the income it provided from tithes and offerings). Such a source of income was assigned, supposedly by the Church and/or the feudal lord, to persons who needed such support while they studied at a university or carried out other religious or secular duties that were not directly related to the parish. The actual duties of the parish were then fulfilled by clerics who were less fortunate and were often poorly paid and poorly trained. While only a few recipients of such absentee benefice-incomes were thereby made wealthy, some received several such gifts, a practice called pluralism. Despite the abuses this practice led to, the bestowing of benefices on relatives or friends continues to this day in the English Church.

Two events of great significance to European history took place during Chaucer's lifetime, although neither is directly referred to in his writing. One, known first as the Babylonian Captivity, was the period during which the papal seat was in Avignon, France, rather than Rome; then it was called the Great Schism, when there were papal seats in both Rome and Avignon. Following a bitter struggle between Pope Boniface VIII and Philip IV, Clement V was elected pope and chose to stay in his native France rather than riot-prone Rome. While several of the French popes were sincere, learned, pious, and efficient, their administration of the world's largest business organization was materialistic and permeated with corruption. Their greatest revenues and therefore greatest disputes came from ecclesiastical appointments, by lay rulers or the church, to bishoprics and abbacies. Finally, in 1377, Pope Gregory XI returned the papal seat to Rome. However, the French were unwilling to concede defeat, and for a time there were two, even three, popes. Not until 1417, with the election of Martin V as pope, did this century of disgraceful conduct come to an end.

The second event was the life of John Wycliffe (1320–1384), an eminent theologian at Oxford University. His death from natural causes, in 1384, saved him from being burned at the stake as a heretic. Although Wycliffe founded no religious order, many of the lower clergy rallied to his beliefs and went about

the countryside preaching and teaching from portions of the Bible which he translated from the Latin Vulgate into the vernacular. This group then became known as the Lollards. A summary of the movement's radical beliefs was presented to Parliament in 1395 under the title "Conclusions." The central doctrine was the responsibility of the individual believer in his relationship to God, without the intercession or authority of the clergy, a concept sometimes called "the priesthood of the believer." This point of view argues that the Bible is the only true source of authority. Therefore, the scriptures should be available to all. This belief resulted in numerous translations—and martyrdom for some of the translators—a struggle with ecclesiastical authority that ended in England with the Authorized or King James Version, commissioned by James I, in 1611.

Other examples of Wycliffe's significant departures from Catholic doctrine were the denial of "transubstantiation" (a belief that the bread and wine served at Communion became the very body and blood of Christ), the rejection of the use of other sacraments and images, of prayers for the dead, of auricular confession, of celibacy for the clergy and chastity for nuns, and the insistence on the submission of the clergy to secular law. Many of these principles were the goals of the Reformation, a century before Martin Luther, and are still central to modern evangelical churches and democratic governments.

The fact that the Parson's conduct and tale reflect several of these convictions has led many scholars to label him a Lollard, although he was not an itinerate preacher but a true pastor of his parish. Chaucer says he would "nat his benefice to hyre / And leet his sheep encombred in the myre / and ran to London unto Seinte Poules / to seken him" ["not his benefice to hire / And left his sheep stuck in the mire / And ran to London into St. Paul's / to find himself"] a better position. Instead, he "dwelte at hoom, and kepte well his folde" [I (A) 507–510] ["dwelt at home, and kept well his fold"]. The effectiveness of his example is testified to by the presence of the Plowman, his brother. Both men exhibit the spiritual qualities that all the reformers sought to teach and that Chaucer affirms in his exposé of several of the other characters. Although the two were "pouvre" in money, they were "riche" in "hooly thought and werk" [I (A) 478] ["holy thought and work"]. The Plowman was a "trewe swynkere (worker)" who lived "in pees and parfit charitee" ["in peace and perfect charity"], for "God loved he best with all his hoole herte. . . . /And thanne his neighebor right as hymselve" [I (A) 531–535] ["God loved him best with his entire heart . . . / and then his neighbor exactly as himself"], fulfilling the Great Commandment named by Jesus in Luke 10:27.

The Parson fulfilled another ideal of the reformers: he was a "learned man, a clerk" [I (A) 480]). Chaucer does not explain how this poor man was able to afford a good education; perhaps he was the recipient of charity. His education is substantiated in his tale by his knowledge of both the Bible and many theological sources. His devout teaching was supported by his conduct. He had compassion for his parishioners; he was unwilling to "cursen for his tithes" [I (A) 486] ["excommunicate those who did not tithe"], preferring if there was

any doubt of their ability to pay to take the money out of his own meager resources. He never permitted bad weather to keep him from walking everywhere in his parish to serve all his people. Thus "first he wroghte, and afterward taughte," [I (A) 497] the gospel. For "to drawen folk to heven by fairnesse, / By good ensample, this was his bisyness" [I (A) 519–520] ["to draw folk to heaven by fairness, / By good example, that was his business"]. However, if any person persisted in sin, whether he was of high or low degree, "Hym wolde he snybben sharply" ["he would rebuke him sharply"]. Chaucer concludes that "A better preest I trowe that nowhere noon ys" [I (A) 523–524] ["A better priest I believe that nowhere none is"].

The Parson's tale, the longest of the Tales, is really a treatise, in the manner of a sermon, on Penitence and the Seven Deadly Sins. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries produced a wealth of such works, many by clergymen but some by laymen. Initially, they were chiefly written to assist the parish priests in the conduct of their duties, but they became popular with the increasingly literate public and often were studied and revised by the universities.

According to W. A. Pantin, in his excellent history of the period, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century,* the best known of these treatises is the "*Oculus Sacerdotis,*" written by William of Pagula, a scholarly churchman of the Salisbury Diocese, in the early fourteenth century. This work, which was to be widely used and often incorporated in later works, contained three parts. Part I was a manual for priests hearing confession. "Special injunctions and interrogations are given as suitable for particular sorts and conditions of men and women, such as drunkards or wrathful men" (Pantin 197). There is even advice for the health of expectant mothers. It also gives detailed instruction in canon law, identifying prescribed penances, sins whose absolution is reserved to the bishop or pope, and sins that incur excommunication.

Part II is a program of instruction for the parish priest's teaching and preaching. Among the practical instructions he was to give his people are such warnings as the danger of letting infants be smothered or overlaid in bed. (The Parson explains, near the conclusion of his tale, that such sins of carelessness, as well as efforts at birth control or abortion, are homicides and therefore deadly sins. The Catholic Church still so labels abortion.) Other instructions range from commanding parents to have their children confirmed within five years of birth, if the bishop is available, to warning foresters and beadles not to force unwarranted collections. Detailed instructions are given for annual confession, Easter communion, devotions at Mass and tithe-paying, and against usury, magic arts, and incantations to cure sick men or animals. Four times a year the priest was to explain to his parishioners, in their vernacular, the fourteen articles of faith, the seven sacraments, the seven works of mercy, the seven virtues, the ten commandments of the law and the two of the gospel, and the seven deadly sins. This part ends with remedies for each sin.

Part III of the *Oculus* deals with the seven sacraments, partly from a theological point of view and partly from a canonical and practical point of view,

discussing such special problems as the baptism of a person unable to speak, and a long list of the advantages and disadvantages of matrimony. Among the many derivative or similarly inspired works Pantin presents, he mentions Chaucer's "Parson's Tale," describing it as "a good, straightforward, rather conventional example of a treatise on confession and on the seven sins and their remedies" (Pantin 226–227).

Since the subject matter of most of these treatises was such complex concepts as the ten commandments, the seven deadly sins, the seven sacraments, and the articles of the creed, a variety of literary techniques was used to make the concepts memorable. The most common method was dividing each major point into minor points, the method of philosophical scholasticism. Any modern reader of the "Parson's Tale" is a bit nonplussed by his constant use of this technique. For example, he has sixteen subdivisions for the sin of pride: Inobedience, Avautynge, Ypocrisie, Despit, Arrogance, Inpudence, Swellynge of Herte, Insolence, Elacioun, Inpacience, Strif, Contumacie, Presumpcioun, Irreverance, Pertinacie, and Veyne Glorie; and then frequently adds three or more divisions of each subdivision. However, numbering major points is still part of most sermons and lectures, essays and dissertations.

Sometimes ideas were emphasized by pairing, as the seven vices and the seven virtues, or the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost and the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer, or, well beyond the "sacred sevens," were twelve abuses in religion and twelve abuses in the world, or the fourteen pains of Hell and the fourteen blessednesses of Heaven.

While the Parson disclaimed ability to use alliteration or rhyme, both common devices even today, he did use illustrations from experience and observation, and the timeless appeal to authority. He naturally quotes from the Bible, not only its words of wisdom but also to cite the example of Jesus and such good characters or prophets as David, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jacob, James the Apostle, Jeremiah, Job, John the Evangelist, Mary Magdalene, Matthew, Micah, Moses, Noah, Peter, Paul, Solomon and Zechariah, and even such bad examples as Judas and Simon the Pharisee. His authorities outside the Bible include Saints Ambrose, Anselm, Antony, Augustine, Basil, Bernard, Damasie (Pope Damasus), George, Gregorie, Isadore, Jerome and John Crisostom, and the wise pagans Galen and Seneca.

The period was a classic one for preaching, with an abundance of influential sermons and great preachers from every walk of ecclesiastical life: bishops, friars, monks, and secular chaplains. And since both preachers and laymen were aware of the abuses in the religious structure, their criticism was bold and frequent—until the reaction of the privileged class set in, a reaction that condemned Wycliffe and John Huss and precipitated the Reformation. Chaucer masks his criticism behind his narrator pose as an unsophisticated Canterbury pilgrim, until he gets to the "Parson's Tale." Here are not only almost every sin common to humankind named and judged against a strong belief in right and wrong, Heaven and Hell, but also many of the faults previously ascribed to the other pilgrims.

The "Parson's Tale" is usually labeled a discourse on the seven deadly sins. Actually, it begins with a long and earnest plea for Penitence, in which terms are carefully defined and the appropriate penance is described. His emphasis on each individual's responsibility for his own sin and the sincerity with which he should seek reformation reflect the Lollard position: "For, certes, if he be baptized withouten penitence of his olde gilt, he receyveth the mark of baptisme, but nat the grace ne the remission of his synnes" [X (I) 97] ["For, surely, if he was baptised without penitence of his old guilt, he received the mark of baptism, but not the grace nor the remission of his sins"].

The dictionary lists the seven deadly sins as pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. The Parson treats the sins in a slightly different order: de Superbia (pride), de Invidia (envy), de Ira (anger), de Accidia (sloth), de Avarica (greed), de Gula (gluttony), and de Luxuria (lechery). When he says that there are two kinds of pride, one within a man and the other without the man, he gives considerable detail, as for expensive, exotic, or elaborate clothing, mentioning embroidering, notching of borders, stripes, fur trim, folding, punched or slit designs, and immodestly short coats. When he asks the rhetorical question as to the source of pride, he answers that it may come from a person's health, physical strength, or good looks, or from his wit and knowledge, or from his sense of righteousness—for none of which should he take credit, since they are the gifts of God. With such many-faceted analyses he deals with each sin.

He deals with this multitude of human weaknesses with vivid images and common sense reasoning, often showing how the sins are intertwined. Of the sin of anger he says that pride blows on the flames of the fire of anger and that envy "holdeth the hoot iren upon the herte of man with a peire of longe toonges of long rancour" [X (I) 555] ["holds the hot iron upon the heart of man with a pair of long tongs of long rancor"]. However, he recognizes that there are different levels of sinning. He labels habitual drunkenness a deadly sin, for it destroys a man's reason, but the drunkenness that is the result of someone not knowing the strong effect of a drink would be only a venial sin.

He reserves some of his strongest condemnation for those who seek spiritual office out of avarice:

> For as seith Seint Damasie, "Alle the synnes of the world, at regard of this synne, arn as thyng of noght." For it is the grettestse synne that may be, after the synne of Lucifer and Anticrist. . . . For they putten in theves that stelen the soules of Jhesus Crist and destroyen his partimoyne. [X (I) 787, 789]
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> [For as said Pope Damasus, "All the sins of the world, in regard of this sin, are like possessions of nothing." For it is the greatest sin that may be, after the sin of Lucifer and the Antichrist. . . . For they put in thieves that steal the souls of Jesus Christ and destroy his inheritance.]

So much for Chaucer's view of absentee benefices and pluralism, and several of his "religious" pilgrims.

Following each explanation of a transgression, the Parson offers the remedy, assuring the sinner of God's mercy and the blessedness of reform. His thorough knowledge of human nature makes him more than a spokesman for religious doctrines. There is little emphasis on liturgical rituals and great emphasis on the psychology of sinning. His recognition that many sinners find it hard to trust divine understanding and mercy or to believe that they will be given the spiritual strength to resist bad habits and temptation makes his preaching compassionate, his character convincing. Chaucer's "Retraction" also attests to the sincerity with which he speaks through the Parson. Chaucer asks Jesus to give him the grace to bewail his guilt and study for the salvation of his soul, following the steps of penitence, confession, and penance that his ideal parish priest has so convincingly preached.

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Chapter 23

With Hym Ther Was a Plowman, Was His Brother

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Certainly, one of the most memorable aspects of Chaucer's writings for a general audience or for a scholarly one is the descriptions of the pilgrims in the "General Prologue" to the *Canterbury Tales.* From the ideally presented Knight to the dishonest Miller to the morally and physically bankrupt Pardoner, we admire the curious and subjective eye of the Chaucer pilgrim. Among the pilgrims he describes, the Plowman stands out to readers perhaps most markedly by his silence; he does not tell a tale, has no verbal interaction with other pilgrims, and has no reference made to his presence by other pilgrims. Such a lack of prominence has led Jill Mann to contend that "Chaucer's interest in the ploughman seems perfunctory; the portrait in the *Prologue* mentions enough traditional characteristics to ensure our recognition of an ideal stereotype, but shows little feeling for his position" (73). Donald R. Howard even labels this Plowman's portrait "an anachronism" as a result of Chaucer's idealization of his estate (102).

Yet in the Middle Ages, the plowman was both valuable and most certainly vital to the economic well-being of society, especially amidst the crises of the fourteenth century. That Chaucer represents him is no mistake; in fact, that he is the only representative apart from the yeoman of the *laboratores* (the laboring class) is probably significant in the poet's overall enterprise of selectively depicting late medieval society. Rodney Hilton has shown the great disparity of land held by this class; peasants were by no means on equal footing. Considerable diversity existed among the group, with the ownership of a plow and plow team as an indication of higher status (*Class Conflict* 140–145). Overall, Chaucer's Plowman is a sign of stability and material and economic innovation—perhaps even success. As we will see here, silence can sometimes speak volumes.