

‘Our own most severe judges’: The Power of Penance in the Eusebius Gallicanus Sermons

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Religious power can be indirect. In the sermons of the Eusebius Gallicanus collection, composed and compiled in Gaul between the fifth and early sixth centuries, preachers attempted a subtle coercion. They preached an ideal of internalized compunction. The Christian faithful were urged to be their own ‘most severe’ judges and thereby to pre-empt the judgement of God. In so doing, the Eusebian preachers emphasized the role of individuals in ensuring their own salvation and appeared to limit clerical control over the expiatory process. Power, however, was being reshaped, not relinquished. No agency was conceded to the laity and new, subtle pressures were brought to bear upon them. The forces of community consensus and personal responsibility were equally, and perhaps more effectively, coercive.

The history of late antique penance is currently being rewritten. The evidence of the Eusebius Gallicanus sermons, however, has not yet been brought into the picture. Although largely unknown to modern scholars, these sermons enjoyed a broad popularity and influence and their preaching on penance was extensively plagiarised by Caesarius of Arles, among others. Furthermore, the Eusebius Gallicanus sermons nuance and challenge our understanding of late antique penance. Their engagement with, but also departures from, the teachings of Augustine of Hippo, are part of the complex story of his reception in Gaul during a period of debate over grace, free will and pastoral care.

This paper explores the model of penitence advanced by the Eusebius Gallicanus preachers and their efforts to have their congregants internalize the power of the church. Their goal was to strengthen Christian communities, but also to consolidate their own positions within them. Theirs was not a form of direct or combative pastoral authority, which could be difficult to impose and which posed risks for the vulnerable cleric. Instead, it was indirect and less open to challenge. The difference between the style of the Eusebian preachers and that of some contemporaries is revealed through contrasting treatments of penitential *exempla* such as the Ninevites and the good thief. The emerging picture is of individual and nuanced approaches to expiation. The preachers of late antique Gaul borrowed extensively from one another, and from a common cultural fund, but shaped their pastoral care according to their own power and its limits within their communities.