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*Craig McDonald*

Mirror, Filter, or Magnifying Glass?  
John Ireland's *Meroure of Wyssdome*

In trying to clarify an especially sticky point about Christ's real presence in the Eucharist, John Ireland, in Book 6 of the *Meroure of Wyssdome*, writes:

alsua wil þou tak a merour / richt litle and ane als mekle as a hous / and put a man  
befor þam baith / þar sal appeir / bot the figur of a man in ilkane / and the man is  
bot ane / þocht the figur and similitude be diuers / bot and þou brek þe merour in  
mony partis / þe figur will appeir in ilkane of þe partis / Richt sua and þar war  
ane hoste / als gret as a hous and ane vthir als litle / as it þat we use the body of  
ihesu contenit in baith war all ane / and þocht ilkane of þame war diuidit in a  
hundreth thousand partis / the body of ihesu war vnder þame / bot ane<sup>1</sup>

The image of the shattered mirror, which he attributes to St. Augustine,<sup>2</sup> raises interesting questions, not only as to the host's ability to carry the body of Christ in its entirety, which is Ireland's immediate point, but, given the title of Ireland's work, the ability of a text to reflect its source or the idea it

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<sup>1</sup>*Johannes de Irlandia's Meroure of Wyssdome*, Vol. III (Books 6-7), ed. Craig McDonald, STS, 4th Series, 19 (1990), 33. References to Vol. I (Books 1-2) are from Charles Macpherson's edition, STS, 2nd Series, 19 (1926), and to Vol. II (Books 3-5) are from F. Quinn's edition, STS, 4th Series, 1 (1965).

<sup>2</sup>See Ireland's Commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, Aberdeen University Library MS 264, ff. 208r, 211r-211v. I am grateful to Aberdeen University Library for supplying me with a microfilm of the MS.

is meant to convey and explain. We might be tempted to ask how successfully the *Meroure* itself reflects the tenets of wisdom to the reader, or, if we take the approach of some modern critics, whether there is anything to reflect at all. I do not wish to approach the subject so abstractly by presuming in eight pages to define a virtue that Ireland meditated upon for 350 folios and then to criticize his success or failure in the matter. Instead, I would like to approach the subject more humbly, by comparing a portion of the *Merour* to a related text and considering the effect of our knowledge of the one on our understanding of the other.

The text to be used for comparison is a portion of Ireland's commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, Book 4,<sup>3</sup> the subject of which, as in the *Meroure*, Book 6, is sacramental theology. The latter, in Middle Scots, though addressed specifically to King James IV, was aimed at a popular audience; the former, in Latin, presumably grew out of lectures delivered in classes on theology at the University of Paris. An issue of some concern to Ireland, which he treats in over ten closely written folios of the proheme to the Commentary but which he does not mention directly in the *Meroure*, is conciliarism. By examining the proheme and related passages in the Middle Scots work, I would argue that we can find substantial traces of Ireland's conciliarist sympathies in the *Meroure*.<sup>4</sup>

Ireland's views on ecclesiastical polity, as defined in the Commentary, place him in the same camp as the great conciliarists of the earlier part of the century, especially his posthumous mentor, Jean Gerson, whose French sermons enjoy such unacknowledged prominence in the seventh book of the *Meroure*. Ireland concentrates on the standard fare of Biblical texts: Matthew 16:18-20 ("*tu es Petrus, et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam, et portae inferi non praevalerunt adversus eam. Et tibi dabo claves*

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<sup>3</sup>The Commentary, according to James Burns, "John Ireland: Theology and Public Affairs in the Late Fifteenth Century," *Innes Review*, 41, No. 2 (Autumn 1990), 157, was probably written in Paris in the early 1480s before Ireland returned permanently to Scotland from France.

<sup>4</sup>W. E. Brown has called these sympathies into question, in "A Medieval Scottish Preacher," *St. Peter's College Magazine—Claves Regni*, 14, No. 53 (December 1939), 59, cited by James Burns, "John Ireland and 'The Meroure of Wyssdome,'" *Innes Review*, 6 (1955), 82. Burns refutes Brown's claim by drawing upon the Commentary to demonstrate Ireland's loyalty to mainstream conciliarism. I would argue that the *Meroure* itself lends support to such a view. Since the writing of this article, Professor Burns has called my attention to a recent study by Hans-Jürgen Becker, *Die Appellation vom Papst an ein allgemeines Konzil* (Cologne and Vienna, 1988), pp. 149-230, 339-55, which argues that conciliarism enjoyed a resurgence about the time Ireland was writing his commentary (the early 1480s). Ireland's need for secrecy was thus not as great as it might have appeared.

*regni caelorum. Et quodcumque ligaveris super terram, erit ligatum et in caelis: et quodcumque solveris super terram, erit solutum et in caelis*)<sup>5</sup>, what Jaroslav Pelikan calls the *locus classicus* of the conciliarist argument;<sup>5</sup> Matthew 18:15-20, Christ's promise to be with the Church in community (wherever two or more are gathered in His Name); Matthew 28:20, Christ's promise to be with the Church till the end of the age; and selections from the Book of the Acts, which depict the apostles working corporately. The upshot of these passages, along with supporting evidence from various church Fathers, councils, and popes, is the communal nature of the Church and the location of power in that community as a whole.

Ireland argues that while the pope is greater than any other single member of the Church, the corporate body is greater than any individual, even the pope. Christ is still the true head of the mystical body, and the pope's function is a pragmatic one.<sup>6</sup>

Knowledge of Ireland's attitudes is nothing new. James Burns, nearly thirty years ago, included Ireland among the ranks of Scottish conciliarists, the heir at St. Andrews of such noted participants in the Council of Basel as John Athilmer, James Olgilvie, and Thomas Livingstone.<sup>7</sup> But what distinguishes Ireland from these earlier conciliarists is his position in history—a time when no council was even remotely on the horizon and when a papal ban, the bull "*Execrabilis*," was at least formally in effect—and the market in which he proffered his conciliarist wares, the theological classroom. Most studies of the conciliarist movement in the fifteenth century rely on contemporary tracts devoted specifically to that purpose.<sup>8</sup> Ireland's alliance with the

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<sup>5</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*. Vol. 4: *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* (Chicago, 1983), p. 115.

<sup>6</sup>The preceding is a summary of ff. 119<sup>r</sup>-131<sup>v</sup> of the Commentary.

<sup>7</sup>Burns, "The Conciliarist Tradition in Scotland," *Scottish Historical Review*, 42 (October 1963): 94-6; see also "John Ireland and 'The Meroure of Wyssdom,'" pp. 82-3, 93.

<sup>8</sup>Of all the conciliar tracts and records for the fifteenth century that Anthony Black has compiled, there is not a single work of a primarily theological nature listed—see the bibliography in his *Council and Commune: The Conciliar Movement and the Fifteenth-Century Heritage* (London, 1979). Most of the primary sources are those in which one would expect to find conciliarist ideas propagated or refuted. St. Thomas Aquinas' commentary on Book 4 of Lombard's *Four Sentences* is one of the few exceptions, and he is mentioned only as he deals with the organic analogy in question 24, and in his treatment of the keys of the Kingdom in question 19, which deals with penance. He was certainly not dealing with the conciliar issue.

cause, by contrast and perhaps by necessity, is less overt. Choosing such a forum and such a manner in which to carry on the tradition intimates that he is capable of doing something similar in the *Meroure*. Though well aware of the dangers of proof-texting and ghost-hunting myself, I submit that portions of the *Meroure*, whose primary aim is to instruct the Scottish public in the abc's of Christianity,<sup>9</sup> presuppose a conciliarist framework.

The manner by which Ireland instructs the king in the seven sacraments is, after a two-chapter introduction, to acquaint him with each sacrament in turn. Ireland follows a consistent pattern of identifying the form and matter of the sacrament, explaining it, usually by some analogy to physical experience, and then refuting the heresies that would undermine a proper understanding of the sacrament. Some of the heresies Ireland mentions, such as certain brands of gnosticism, were less immediately threatening to fifteenth-century Scotland and are mentioned, it seems, for historical purposes. Others, such as Donatism, which appeared under the guise of the Wycliffite teaching that denied the efficacy of sacraments administered by priests of unholy life, pose a more direct threat. Thus, Ireland is keen to resolve the problem of what makes a true priest. This he attempts to do in chapters devoted to penance (cc. 8-11) and holy orders (cc. 13-15).<sup>10</sup> Such an issue naturally raises questions about ecclesiastical authority, and it is as he answers these questions that Ireland betrays his conciliarist sympathies. While fighting an open enemy, John Wycliffe, Ireland would covertly challenge the pope's claims to supreme authority.

We might begin with what seems to be Ireland's conservatism in matters of ecclesiastical polity: his exaltation of the pope as the vicar of God, seated above all Christian people and endowed with universal power to ordain priests and bishops, to grant other dignities, and to absolve from sin.<sup>11</sup> The pope resembles the secular prince, a similarity that Ireland underscores by structural and verbal parallels in the *Meroure*. In respective books (6 and 7), Ireland devotes a chapter to each as the "lieutenant" of God, the one spiritual, the other temporal.<sup>12</sup> Each, too, is a *pater*-Ireland even calls the king *pastor*.<sup>13</sup> Along other lines he ascribes to the pope a phrase common to the

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<sup>9</sup>*Meroure*, I, 14.

<sup>10</sup>*Meroure*, III, 44-73, 78-94.

<sup>11</sup>*Meroure*, III, 90-4. The warrant for this power is Christ's charge to Peter in John 21:7, "Feed my sheep."

<sup>12</sup>*Meroure*, III, 91-4, 155-60.

<sup>13</sup>*Meroure*, III, 92, 120.

papalists, *plenitudo potestatis*.<sup>14</sup> In so doing, Ireland would appear to have moderated his principles of a decade earlier, or perhaps to have been unwilling to propagate them beyond the relatively safe confines of the classroom.

Ireland is judicious, to be sure, but he is not cowardly, and proof that he would stand by his earlier opinions is that on at least nine different occasions throughout the *Meroure*, he has beckoned us to examine his Commentary if we would know his mind more fully. Thus, it would seem that he has little he wishes to hide. This would drive us to look for evidence of such consistency in the *Meroure* itself.

Let us consider Ireland's treatment of Matthew 16:18-19, the thorniest of all the scriptural texts on authority, because according to one interpretation it vests supreme power in Peter and his papal successors. In the Commentary Ireland answers the challenge of this passage to the authority of the general council by arguing from Luke 9:20 that Christ is speaking to all the disciples, who have been represented by Peter as spokesman. The rock is most certainly Christ, and it is the Church as a whole that receives the keys.<sup>15</sup> How does Ireland handle the passage in the *Meroure*? Though not polemical in tone, the relevant passage in the *Meroure* leaves the reader with essentially the same understanding as a by-product of achieving different aims. Christ declares that He will build his Church upon the rock of the faith confessed by Peter and the apostles, and that He will entrust the *claves*, the keys of the kingdom, to the whole Church.

The phrase *plenitudo potestatis*, spoken of earlier, must be redefined to accord with this revised hierarchy. Ireland does this in two ways. First, he emphasizes the pope's identification with all other priests, who, like him, possess two sacerdotal powers. The first is the power of ordination, which descends immediately from Christ, impressing upon the recipient an indelible character and imbuing him with the authority to administer the sacraments. The second, the power of jurisdiction to absolve from sin, is the power that would elevate the pope above the other priests only because his influence is worldwide, whereas theirs is limited geographically. This power, it is true, extends to closing the hands of a priest, i.e., denying him the power of juris-

<sup>14</sup>*Meroure*, III, 91.

<sup>15</sup>Pelikan (*Christian Tradition*, vol. 4) lists six interpretations of the term "rock" sympathetic to the conciliarist position: Christ, faith, Peter's confession, Scripture, Peter as a preacher/missionary instead of the pontiff, and finally, all apostles, though especially Peter (115). Matthew 16 cannot be taken as a proof text of Peter's distinctive power, because in 18:18 Christ grants to all the apostles power to bind and loose sins (116). Even Christ's admonition that Peter feed the sheep in John 21:7 was narrowed to apply to certain people (116). See also Brian Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory: The Contribution of the Medieval Canonists from Gratian to the Great Schism* (Cambridge, 1955), pp. 26-8.

diction though not removing the character of priesthood, for reasonable cause. Still, the pope's power is different essentially in degree, not kind.

Secondly, Ireland alters a legal expression used by the canonists to speak of the pope's authority, "*potestas iurisdictionis in foro exteriori*," by dropping the phrase "*in foro exteriori*." Ireland does not describe the effects of such a change, but it appears that he would limit the pope's jurisdiction to a sacerdotal, rather than political, sphere, granting him the power to forgive sins and to bestow that power on members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The political jurisdiction *in foro exteriori* is by implication left to the general council.<sup>16</sup> To be sure, even such power of jurisdiction as Ireland would allow the pope to retain could have political consequences, when, for example, the pope excommunicated a monarch; but even then, the issue is penance, not politics, and Ireland leaves to others the work of attending to such practical matters.

Ireland's clearest definition of the nature of the Church and the roles of its constituents comes outside Book 6. This we find in Book 3, an exposition of the Apostle's creed, where, commenting on the phrase *Sanctam ecclesiam catholicam*, he writes:

And þis I writ and allegis þat . . . þe vniuersale kyrk is the reule wnfalable / in the mater of the faith / *et est materia omni fidelium* / þat pape empriour king and all maner of persoune mon trow and obey to . . . for the haly spreit þat may nocht Er / reulis & gouernis the kyrk / and þe apostlis quhen þai war togiddir gaderit in the counsale / *in libro actuum* / said in þar diffinicioun and determinacioun *visum est spiritui sancto et nobis*<sup>17</sup>

Ireland's recognition of the universal Church as supreme in matters of faith is crucial, because it attributes to a body, rather than any individual, regardless of his power or position in that body, the unerring guidance of the Holy Spirit. Note that Ireland relies on the Book of the Acts to substantiate this claim. He calls upon Acts later, this time chapter 8, as evidence that the authority of bishops descends from the apostles.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly enough, Ireland had used this passage, which describes the apostles laying hands on Peter and John, in the Commentary to support his conciliarist position (f. 127<sup>r</sup>).

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<sup>16</sup>See Francis Oakley's discussion on the struggle to define precisely the powers of the pope and councils in *The Western Church in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London, 1979), pp. 157-74.

<sup>17</sup>*Meroure*, II, 65.

<sup>18</sup>*Meroure*, III, 18.

The next question, then, is how the universal Church determines matters of faith, given the impossibility of calling all Christendom together. This is the task of the general council, which Ireland designates as the representative of the universal Church. Even if the churchmen attending council prove unworthy of their office, the promise of the presence of the Holy Spirit ensures conciliar infallibility in matters of faith: "bocht the kyrkmen that cummys to be counsale for the mater of the faith / be of euill lif / 3it the counsale & vniuersale kyrk sall nocht Er na may nocht."<sup>19</sup> Thus, we find the syllogism operating: The pope is subject to the universal Church; the universal Church is represented by the general council; ergo, the pope is subject to the general council.

One final piece of evidence, a small one, reveals Ireland's conciliarist bias. In Book 7, when speaking of the matter of law, with emphasis on secular positive law, Ireland departs momentarily from his source, Jean Gerson's sermon *Diligite iusticiam*, which he translates faithfully for several pages, to comment briefly on the positive law—the counsels, decretals, and constitutions—of the Church. As the sources of this law, he lists in this order, but without further elaboration, the Church, councils, and pope.<sup>20</sup> Given what we have seen of Ireland's position, the order is certainly deliberate.

Throughout the *Meroure*, we see Ireland broadening the base of power as a countermeasure to papalist attempts to narrow it.<sup>21</sup> Christ, he asserts, is the only one with ultimate authority to ordain as judges the apostles and their successors.<sup>22</sup> The pope is the highest judge by virtue of his dominion and thus deserves a respect consonant with this office. But his power is not without purpose. That purpose? The peace, concord, and unity of the Church.<sup>23</sup> Although this seems reasonable and conventional enough (in Book 7 Ireland certainly emphasizes the virtue of peace in the temporal realm, drawing substantially on Gerson's sermon *Veniat pax*), we might do well to remember the earlier historical context, the Great Schism, which had thrust the Church into chaos, nearly rending her apart. What about a pope who was responsible for such a shameful affair? Might he be deposed by the

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<sup>19</sup>*Meroure*, II, 64, 65.

<sup>20</sup>*Meroure*, III, 112.

<sup>21</sup>*Meroure*, III, 83-4.

<sup>22</sup>*Meroure*, III, 78, 91.

<sup>23</sup>*Meroure*, III, 90.



general council? Ireland's position in the Commentary (f. 128<sup>v</sup>) is clear: the general council may resist a pope who causes scandal in the Church. Admittedly, he never addresses the issue specifically in the *Meroure*, just as he draws back from Gerson's assertion in *Vivat rex* that the kingdom may use force to resist a tyrant. But evidence of Ireland's conciliarism in the *Meroure* is strong enough to imply these consequences in the case of the pope and perhaps the king as well.<sup>24</sup>

Returning to the opening image of the mirror, what might we conclude about the *Meroure of Wyssdome* as an indication of Ireland's conciliar ideas? I would maintain that these passages from Ireland's *Meroure*, like the pieces of the broken mirror in his illustration, do reflect the sentiments of the Commentary, though it is true that given the intention of the *Meroure*, he has filtered out their more radical tone.<sup>25</sup> The point that suggests itself as a result of this comparative reading is the need for close contextual as well as textual study, for then we find even the most derivative work like the *Meroure* stamped with the peculiar impression of its author's mind.

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<sup>24</sup>See Burns, "John Ireland and 'The Meroure of Wyssdome,'" pp. 82-3, 93; and Roger Mason, "Kingship, Tyranny and the Right to Resist in Fifteenth Century Scotland," *Scottish Historical Review*, 66 (October 1987), 140-41. Mason argues that while Ireland's conciliarism might endorse the deposition of a pope, it would not extend to overthrowing a king. Burns believes that the phrase "gouernyng of him [the king]" (*Meroure*, III, 152-3) "could be fraught with consequences; but we cannot be sure of their implications for Ireland."

<sup>25</sup>I would argue that in other places Ireland does in fact magnify his ideas by departing from his sources at strategic points. In a passage on justice, for example, Ireland inserts a personal note on the need for equity (*Meroure*, III, 112). Elsewhere (*Meroure*, III, 127), he emphasizes the mutual obligation between the king and his subjects in a passage that Mason ("Kingship," p. 140) deems to be original. He stops short of advocating tyrannicide, though his mentor Gerson had crossed the pale in Ireland's source. And finally, in responding to Marsilius of Padua's case for monarchical election in *Defensor Pacis*, Ireland simply inverts the points (see Sally Mapstone's Oxford D. Phil., "The Advice to Princes Tradition," 1986, pp. 433-43); but at the same time the spirit of his argument differs from Marsilius'. He calls to witness a host of classical, biblical, historical, and social sources to sustain his argument, whereas Marsilius relies on Aristotle almost exclusively. Because so much of the 7th book is not original to Ireland, these departures, it would seem to me, are that much more important in revealing Ireland's mind to us. The *Meroure* as a translation then has more than a mirroring effect: it refracts and magnifies.