

Repenting for the sins of the past to heal the wounds of history*

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Introduction

The Holy Spirit is teaching the Church about identificational repentance and the purification of memories at this time. As we respond to the Spirit's call for a confession of the sins of the past, we are contributing in a significant way to the renewal of the Church and the evangelization of the world.

Content

Why Now?

Pope John Paul II's Distinctive

Contribution: The Purification of Memories

Two Major Questions

Solidarity and Identification

Unofficial and Official Initiatives

In Practice Four specific elements:

1. *Research*
2. *Confession*
3. *Identification*
4. *Lamentation*

Asking Forgiveness

Conclusion

confessed the sins relating in some way to the area of their responsibilities.

This development seems to have been particularly the idea and the initiative of Pope John Paul II himself. While a Catholic community like the Community of Sant' Egidio has played a major role in some reconciliation initiatives, the Holy Father's call for a confession of the sins of the past does not seem to have been a response to grass-roots initiatives. Since 1994, John Paul II has taken a number of opportunities to acknowledge a Catholic responsibility for sins of the past, especially during his visit to Israel in 2000 and his visit to Athens in 2001.

Repenting for the sins of the past to heal the wounds of history*

The call for Catholics to confess the sins of the past is something new in Catholic history. It was first expressed in 1994 by Pope John Paul II in his letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (TMA), initiating the Church's preparation for the Great Jubilee of the year 2000¹. As we are dealing with a relatively new area in Catholic teaching and theological reflection, there is as yet no well-established terminology. The Holy Father has himself encouraged the necessary theological reflection by asking the International Theological Commission to work on this subject. Their document, entitled "Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past" (MR), was published a few days before the penitential liturgy celebrated in St Peter's, Rome, on 12th March, 2000. In this liturgy, presided over by the Pope himself, seven prelates from key offices in the Roman Curia,

Before looking at the teaching of MR, it should be noted that in the last twenty years there have been a number of new Christian initiatives for reconciliation, involving a confession of the sins of the past. Leaders in the charismatic movement have been playing a major role in these developments. An impetus to this development came from initiatives for black-white reconciliation in North American cities. In 1995, under the leadership of Friedrich Aschoff from the Evangelical [Lutheran] Church in Germany, some German Christians visited all the countries invaded by Hitler's armies to acknowledge their sin and to seek reconciliation on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II. There have been many prayer journeys to pray and confess past sins in places associated with major evils of the past. On the 900th anniversary of the first Crusade, under the leadership of Lynn Green of YWAM, Christians prayed as they walked from Western Europe to Jerusalem, expressing repentance to the leaders of Jewish, Muslim and Orthodox communities en route. Other prayer journeys have visited the

¹ The Holy Father had raised this issue at a meeting with all the Cardinals in 1993.

West African ports used in the slave trade and places associated with crimes committed against the Aborigines in Australia and the Maoris in New Zealand.

Why Now?

Why is a Christian repentance happening at this time in human history? Perhaps because today the conflicts that are tearing the human race apart threaten the future of all humanity. Through the mass media, we cannot be unaware of the appalling barbarities that are being committed in so many parts of the world. It shocks us that such horrors also occur in supposedly Christian nations at a time when we prided ourselves on our scientific and technological progress. Above all, the slaughter of six million Jews in the Holocaust has provoked a radical examination of the Christian conscience: how could such a horror have happened in “Christian Europe”?

The Holy Father’s conviction reflects both his life-long reflection on the major evils of the 20th century, through which he had himself lived in Poland, and his sense of the year 2000 presenting a historic opportunity for the Church and for the world. In preparing for the new millennium, he sought to “look with the eyes of faith” (TMA, para. 17) at the whole history of the Church, at the second millennium between 1,000 and 2,000 and very particularly at the 20th century, “a century scarred by the First and Second World Wars, by the experience of concentration camps and by horrendous massacres.” (TMA, para. 18). John Paul II sees this call for a Catholic confession of the sins of the past as a fruit of the Second Vatican Council, an essential element in the renewal of the Church, and as necessary for the effectiveness of the “new evangelization”.

Many of the Protestant initiatives have arisen as a fruit of prayer for revival. Leaders have understood that the deep wounds resulting from past conflicts constitute a major barrier to effective evangelization of our peoples. Reconciliation initiatives are thus seen as a necessary prelude to more effective evangelism. There is then an element of commonality in the motivation urging both Protestants and Catholics to the confession of the sins of the past. Both

among Protestants and Catholics the attention of Christians is being directed towards the root causes of the long-standing conflicts that continue to plague peoples and nations throughout the world.

Since all Christians recognize that repentance and reconciliation cannot happen apart from the Spirit of God, this new awareness of the need to address and to confess the sins of the past should be understood as a *kairos* in the biblical sense, a decisive turning-point in history.

Pope John Paul II’s Distinctive Contribution: The Purification of Memories

The first contribution of John Paul II is to have placed this issue on the Church’s agenda. As is customary in Catholic documents, MR begins by summarizing the previous contribution of the Church’s magisterium. What is clearly new today is the Pope’s presentation of the confession of past sins as a **task** for the whole Church to undertake.

The Holy Father has identified the purpose of this confession of past sins as “**the purification of memory**”. This concept is a major Catholic contribution to the understanding of what it means to confess the sins of the past.

In TMA, the Holy Father singled out two patterns of past sin that particularly need to be confessed: first, sins against the unity of God’s People²; secondly, the sins of “intolerance and even the use of violence in the service of truth.”³ It is also clear from the Pope’s actions that the sins of Catholics against the Jewish people have weighed heavily on his heart and have played a major role in the call for repentance⁴.

² “Among the sins which require a greater commitment to repentance and conversion should certainly be counted those which have been detrimental to the unity willed by God for his People.” (TMA, para. 34). See MR, para. 5.2, pp. 62 – 66 (page references are to the Pauline Books and Media edition).

³ TMA, para. 35. See MR, para. 5.3, pp. 66 – 67.

⁴ We can see this from his decision to set up special commissions of experts to study the Catholic treatment of the Jewish people throughout the

Memory is how the past is received into the present to shape the future. *MR* states: “This purification aims at liberating personal and communal conscience from all forms of resentment and violence that are the legacy of past faults”⁵. Notice the emphasis on the “personal” and the “communal”. There are personal memories and there are communal memories. In all times of violence and brutality, the most dangerous memories are the communal, in the way that a people or community remembers its conflicts, writes its history, identifies its enemies, justifies its own behaviour. All these communal memories are accompanied and fuelled by personal memories, by the stories of particular families and individuals with their own sufferings and traumas. These memories are then handed down to the following generations, not only in the official histories, but also in popular culture: in songs, in art, in days of special remembrance that even have their own ceremonies and processions, in the honouring of “our heroes”.

We can see these patterns at work in all the long-standing conflicts that have erupted again in recent years: in former Yugoslavia between Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs (mixed too with the Muslims in Bosnia), in Northern Ireland between Protestant Unionists and Catholic Nationalists, in Rwanda between Hutu and Tutsi, in Sri Lanka between Sinhalese and Tamil. Each side has its own history. The histories of the opposing sides have little in common except “we are the heroes, and they are the villains”. Such conflicts can never be healed without a purification of memories: that is to say, without a purification from the bias and all the lies in our histories, leading to a purification of our hearts from the hatred and the rejection of each other.

centuries, as well as another on the Spanish Inquisition. See *MR*, para. 5.4, pp. 67 – 69 and the Apostolic Letter *Ecclesia in Europa*, which calls for “acknowledgment be given to any part which the children of the Church have had in the growth and spread of antisemitism in history” (para. 56).

⁵ *Introduction*, p. 10.

In the Catechism, there is a striking statement: “The Holy Spirit is the Church’s living memory.” (CCC, para. 1099). From this angle we can say that the purification of memory requires a separation of truth from untruth in our memories, with the Holy Spirit enabling and empowering the memories of God’s works, the Holy Spirit convicting of the sins of the past, and the Holy Spirit convicting of all distortions of truth.

Two Major Questions

The first objection is always: Surely we are only responsible for our own sins! How can we repent for sins we did not commit? Everyone involved in this ministry of reconciliation accepts that we are only answerable to God for our own behaviour⁶. The Holy Father’s focus on the purification of memory provides the answer. As Elie Wiesel, the Jewish writer, has said: “while no man is responsible for what his ancestors have done, he is responsible for what he does with that memory.”

A second major question is the relationship of the Church to sin. Here the Vatican documents are careful in their use of language. The Holy Father has spoken several times of the sins committed in the past by “the sons and daughters of the Church”, not of “the sins of the Church”. In TMA, the Pope wrote: “Although she is holy because of her incorporation into Christ, the Church does not tire of doing penance: before God and man she always acknowledges as her own her sinful sons and daughters.” (para. 33). But he then went on to quote *Lumen Gentium*: “The Church, embracing sinners to her bosom, is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, and incessantly pursues the path of penance and renewal.” (para. 8).

The basic reason for not saying that “the Church has sinned” is that the Church is of her nature

⁶ The International Theological Commission has stated: “the imputability of a fault cannot properly be extended beyond the group of persons who had consented to it voluntarily, by means of acts or omissions, or through negligence.” (*MR*, para. 1.3, p. 21).

holy, and that the element of sin that needs purifying does not belong to the Church in the same way as her holiness. MR distinguishes between “the holiness *of* the Church” and “holiness *in* the Church”. The holiness of the Church is “founded on the missions of the Son and the Spirit”⁷; it is the Church formed by the Holy Word of God and the holy sacraments. But in the Church not all is holy. So “Holiness in the Church must therefore correspond to the holiness of the Church.”⁸ This is a moral and spiritual imperative.

We can put this another way by saying that the Church in the fullest sense includes Christ, the head, and all the Church triumphant with Mary and all the saints. In no way can we impute sin to the Church in this deepest sense. However, for the Church militant, the Church here on earth, the sinful element is not confined to individuals. There is a corporate dimension to the sins of Catholics, from which the hierarchy cannot a priori be excluded. To give a topical example, it could be that the Bishops’ Conference of a particular nation is led to confess their sin as a body in not addressing in honesty and in faith the issue of child abuse at the hands of servants of the Church. MR itself cites the confession of Pope Adrian VI who spoke in the year 1522 of “the abominations, the abuses ... and the lies” of which the Roman Curia of his time was guilty, “deep-rooted and extensive ... sickness,” extending “from the top to the members”⁹. It is of the Church militant that the Decree on Ecumenism speaks when it says, “Christ summons the Church, as she goes her pilgrim way, to that continual reform of which she always has need, insofar as she is a human institution here on earth.” (UR, para. 6).¹⁰

The Pope’s appeal for a confession of the sins of Catholics in the past must not then be thought of in a merely individualistic way, because it has both personal and corporate dimensions. When we are dealing with grave patterns of sin from centuries ago, we are hardly ever just dealing

with the sins of particular people, even particular leaders; but generally with attitudes and practices that characterized groups, nations and even the whole Church militant over generations.

However, we face a major dilemma here. To say “the Church has not sinned, it’s only some Catholics” is not convincing to people reading about scandalous situations in the Church and the slow response of Church authorities to scandalous situations, e.g. to child abuse. For the general public, this is the Church. Thus, it is an urgent pastoral requirement to be able to speak of the sinful aspect of the Church as a human institution, without losing sight of the deeper theological reality of the Church.

Solidarity and Identification

MR gives solidarity among the baptized as a further reason for this repentance. “Indeed, in grace and in the woundedness of sin, the baptized of today are close to, and in solidarity with, those of yesterday.”¹¹ It is part of the meaning of the Church as mother that she assumes “the weight of her children’s faults in maternal solidarity”¹².

The Protestant initiatives for reconciliation have almost always focused on the identification of the Christian with her/his own people or nation. Catholics will want to apply this also to the divisions and wounds of the Churches and Christian communities. The biblical basis for this identification is found in the prophetic confession: “we and our fathers have sinned”¹³.

¹¹ Para. 3, p. 40.

¹² Para. 3, 4, p. 49. “The Church, in turn, as a true Mother, cannot but be wounded by the sins of her children of yesterday and today, continuing to love them always, to the point of making herself responsible in all times for the burden created by their sins.” (p. 48).

¹³ See Ps. 106: 6; Jer. 3: 25; Jer. 14: 20. In fact, MR examines the various categories of Old Testament confessions of sin, saying that “more frequent are the confessions that mention the faults of the forebears, linking them expressly to the errors of the present generation” (para. 2, 1, p. 29). On this page can be found a footnote giving a longer list of Old Testament instances.

⁷ MR, 3, 2.

⁸ MR, 3, 2.

⁹ MR, 1, 1.

¹⁰ Cited in MR, 1, 2, note 13 and in 6, 1, note 93.

The great biblical examples here are Nehemiah and Daniel. In chapter 9 of both books, we find a long confession of the sins of the fathers, accompanied by a confession of the sins of their own generation. Maybe this simple biblical confession, “we and our fathers have sinned”, shows us Catholics how to confess the sins of our people in a theologically acceptable way.

In this confession the concept of identification is important. The person making the confession identifies with his/her ancestors. The “we” refers to the present and to the past. Our ancestors committed these sins, our people turned away from the Lord. John Dawson, a major teacher on reconciliation, has written: “Nehemiah and the families with him assembled themselves before the Lord with fasting, in sackcloth and with dust on their heads. Though they were just a remnant, they completely identified with their nation and its history. ‘Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.’ (Neh. 9: 2).”¹⁴

It is important to remember that our redemption has been accomplished by an act of identification – an act of identification by one who was innocent and free of all sin. Thus, the model for understanding identificational repentance must be Jesus himself. The gospel of Matthew presents the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan as his identification with sinners and the prefiguring of his death on the cross. John the Baptist sees the obvious inappropriateness – according to ordinary human thinking – of his baptizing the sinless Jesus: “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matt. 3: 14). But Jesus replies: “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.” (Matt. 3: 15). Jesus so identifies with all sinners that he takes the consequences of all sin upon himself. The fulfilment of this identification on the cross of Calvary accomplishes the righteousness of God.

¹⁴ John Dawson *What Christians Should Know About Reconciliation* (Ventura, CA: International Reconciliation Coalition, 1998: www.reconcile.org), p. 21.

Solidarity in sin over generations is recognized by Jesus in his warnings against the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23, culminating in the dreadful prophecy: “Truly, I say to you, all this will come upon this generation.” (Matt. 23: 36). Jesus directly addresses those who deny any link with the sins of their ancestors, saying “If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.” (Matt. 23: 30). The response of Jesus is very blunt: “Thus you witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.” (Matt. 23: 31).

Unofficial and Official Initiatives

We may think: who am I to confess sins on behalf of anybody else? How can I present myself as representing the Catholics of previous generations? Nobody has appointed me to such a responsibility. The answer to this question lies in the important distinction between (1) private initiatives for reconciliation, which are hidden, and (2) official initiatives involving appointed representatives, which are necessarily public.

To act unofficially as a spiritual representative of my church or nation is possible because of my identity (who I am). As a committed Catholic, I carry the Catholic heritage within myself. This is a consequence of my commitment and identification. My incorporation into the heritage and the presence of the heritage in me are foundationally the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes alive in me and in us the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church through the ages. Just as lay people can evangelize because they are baptized believers with the indwelling Spirit, so too can lay people intercede and pray as bearers of the Church’s heritage.

Those sensing a call to reconciliation prayer should probably begin with local issues, for example, if you live near a town which expelled the Jewish population, or a place where Protestant martyrs died. The principle of beginning with the small is biblical, as we find in the words of Jesus: “Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a

little, I will set you over much” (Matt. 25: 21, 23).

In fact, the addressing of age-old conflicts through the Holy Spirit really has to begin from private initiatives. The purpose of unofficial acts of repentance is to begin breaking the grip of the spiritual forces at work in these conflict zones. Those engaging in unofficial initiatives through spiritual identification should not seek publicity. The work is hidden and the immediate fruit is hidden. “Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matt. 6: 6).

Official initiatives of identificational repentance take place when people in authority who officially represent their nation or church confess the sins of their ancestors, identify with them and ask forgiveness. This governmental level repentance has to be made as public as possible. The participants are officially representing their entire people. But such public occasions are not suited to deep grieving, and if they are to be effective the way needs to be prepared by the private and unofficial initiatives of Christians led by the Holy Spirit.

In Practice

In our contribution to the full process of reconciliation, there need to be four specific elements:

4. **Research**

This word may be off-putting, but what it really means is: “get your facts right”. When we want to confess the sins of the past, we will endanger the whole process if we make false historical statements. This is all the more necessary when people from both sides of an historical conflict are praying together. How much serious research is needed will depend on how public the initiative is, and how deep it is going¹⁵. The

¹⁵ *MR* insists on a rigorous historical analysis: “One must ask: What precisely occurred? What exactly was said and done? Only when these questions are adequately answered through rigorous historical analysis can one then ask whether what happened, what was said or done, can be understood as

goal must be that all present at such intercessory prayer can say “Amen” to the confession of sin, including the assertions about past history.

5. **Confession.**

After establishing the facts about what happened in the past, we have to discern between the good and the evil. The confession of past sin involves saying: “This happened in the past. And it was evil.” In the process leading to confession, it is wise to focus on the most blatant evils. A confession will not be convincing if lesser evils from a particular historical situation or period are confessed, while nothing is said about a greater evil. It is essential too that the acknowledgment of past acts as evil does not descend into judgment of particular people¹⁶.

6. **Identification.**

This means that we identify with those who perpetrated the sins or evils being confessed. It means moving from “They” to “We”. This is to follow in the footsteps of the Old Testament prophets who confessed: “We and our fathers have sinned.” Identification in repentance means, “My people did this. We carry this burden.” It is to affirm the spiritual link through folk-people memories between the generations of the past and our generation today.

Is it possible to identify with groups or nations to which we do not belong in order to confess their past sins? The answer has to be “Yes, it is possible”, because Jesus as a Jew identified with all the peoples of the earth. But identification with another group, church or people cannot just be an intercessory technique; it has to be a personal commitment to the others – as with missionaries who follow the example of Jesus and take on the culture of the people they serve.

consistent with the Gospel, and, if it cannot, whether the Church’s sons and daughters who acted in such a way could have recognized this, given the context in which they acted.” (Para. 4, intro., p. 50). This is clearly speaking of public declarations of repentance. ¹⁶ *MR* distinguishes between “objective” and “subjective” responsibility for human acts (para. 5.1., p. 58): “The only responsibility capable of continuing in history can be the objective kind” (p. 59).

Normally, when we work for reconciliation we should seek first potential participants who belong to one of the groups in conflict.

4. Lamentation.

It is possible to say that an event in 1290 or in 1938 was evil, that it was done by my people and yet to have no remorse or sorrow over it. That is why a grieving of heart has to complete the process. A key principle here is that effective repentance requires a sorrow for sin as deep as the emotional and personal involvement of those who committed the atrocities of the past. When we are dealing with brutal events involving such evils as massacres, torture, rape, enforced exile (what we would now call “ethnic cleansing”), humiliation and degradation, we have to realize that hatred and contempt consumed the perpetrators. Particularly when unofficial groups start to address such evils spiritually, little that is significant will be achieved until the repentance goes as deep as the sin.

Such a grieving of heart cannot be planned or orchestrated. It requires a seeking of the Lord to allow the Holy Spirit to show us the real horror of the sin before the all-holy God. This therefore normally belongs to the sphere of unofficial non-publicized meetings. The charismatic renewal is making an important contribution here, as through the renewal the Lord is enabling us to reconnect with our hearts and to express profound emotions in our prayer and worship.

Asking Forgiveness

In the four stages in the process of reconciliation, I did not mention forgiveness. Maybe this was because forgiveness is not a major focus in MR.¹⁷ But fundamentally our need to confess and to repent for the sins of the past, the need for our memories to be purified, is not dependent on asking for forgiveness or on receiving it. Forgiveness belongs to the response to confessions of sin, their response to our confession and our response to their confession.

Of course, forgiveness must always be asked of God. For all sin is first of all an offence against God. This clearly applies to all confessions of past sin, whether official or unofficial, public or hidden¹⁸.

Meetings to express a public repentance for sins of the past will normally be planned in advance. If any party would be offended or embarrassed by a request for forgiveness, then it would not be included. But should forgiveness from the other party be asked for in unofficial initiatives, such as may happen in some charismatic meetings? First, we need to be sensitive to the dispositions of the victim-group. Descendants of people offended against in the past may not feel that they have the right or the capacity to grant forgiveness. This is often the case with the Jewish people, who will usually say that forgiveness is in the hands of God, and the only humans who could grant it are dead. Secondly, we should be sensitive to the depth of the past suffering. We need to avoid trivializing the evils of the past by thinking that we can enter fully into their history after reading a few books and spending a few hours in prayer.

Conclusion

¹⁷ In the instances of previous papal expressions of repentance, the occasions when forgiveness was asked are explicitly mentioned (MR 1. 1 and 1. 2).

¹⁸ In his exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, the Pope states that for “any part which the children of the Church have had in the growth and spread of antisemitism in history; forgiveness must be sought for this from God” (para. 56).

It would seem that the Holy Spirit is teaching the Church about identificational repentance and the purification of memories at this time. The Spirit's timing is connected with the gravity of the world situation in which we live, and it shows the depth of the renewal that the Father of mercies is willing for the Church and the world. Because of the significance of the charismatic renewal in the Holy Spirit's whole work of renewal, there is a particular responsibility for

renewal leaders to be attuned to this impulse of the Holy Spirit. First, the need is to understand, for only then can we truly teach. As we respond to the Spirit's call for a confession of the sins of the past, we are contributing in a significant way to the renewal of the Church and the evangelization of the world.

Peter Hocken
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Introduction

This issue 125 of Eucrcil had the following introduction:

*The complete text**, written by mgr. dr. Peter Hocken, as a result of the European ICCRS-meeting in Prague, 9-12 September 2004 (see Eucrcil 118 and 122). Translations will be produced.

The Holy Spirit is teaching the Church about identificational repentance and the purification of memories at this time. As we respond to the Spirit's call for a confession of the sins of the past, we are contributing in a significant way to the renewal of the Church and the evangelization of the world.

We are pleased to send you this important paper. Pope John Paul II has been calling the Catholic Church to a confession of past sins, and there have also been some Protestant initiatives of repentance for past wrongs done by Christian countries and authorities.

We therefore asked Fr. Peter to write a paper as a service to us, because there were a lot of requests from CCR leaders who wanted a better understanding of this important question.

The first edition has been studied by the European National Service Committees, Head Contacts, and Correspondents, and was discussed in Prague in September. The now completed edition is free to publish.

The European sub-committee of ICCRS

* This text has also been published in a printed booklet by Good News in England with the title: "Healing the Wounds of History" Priced at 75p (discounts available) To place an order please contact: Goodnews, Alien Hall, 28 Beaufort Street, London SW3 5AA. Tel: 020 7352 5298 email: help@ccr.org.uk

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