

Priests' Conference, Hungary, November 2006

Opening Session: Monday Nov. 27

The Long Shadows of the Past

I am struck by the timing of this conference on reconciliation, repentance and forgiveness. It comes soon after your national celebration of the 50th anniversary of the heroic Hungarian revolution against Soviet occupation. But this was also a time when present-day divisions in Hungary were manifested on the streets of Budapest and in the way the anniversary was celebrated.

As you also know better than I, this year on 29th June saw the issue of statements from Cardinal Peter Erdö as president of the Hungarian Bishops' Conference and Archbishop Ján Sokol of Bratislava/Trnava as president of the Slovak Bishops' Conference of mutual confession and forgiveness.

And today Pope Benedict XVI arrived in Turkey, surely the most dangerous papal journey to date in the modern international papacy, coming after an explosion of Muslim rage about a section of the Pope's speech in Regensburg in September. The point for us is not so much a better understanding of Mohammed, but why such a small mention in a highly academic paper should trigger such reactions. It is not hard to see that there has been an accumulation of anger and distrust through the centuries as a result of far distant events, particularly stemming from the history of the Crusades. Some people felt the Pope lost a big opportunity, when speaking of the wrongness of all violence in the name of God, when he made no reference to the violence of Catholics against Muslims many centuries ago. However, this talk was not planned as a major statement to the world, but a reflection among scholars in his former university.

But the primary purpose of the Pope's visit to Turkey was not originally to see the Grand Mufti of Istanbul, though he hopes to pour oil on troubled waters, but it is to meet with the Orthodox Patriarch, Bartholomew I. Here too the shadows of the past stretch long. For the Orthodox, a visit of the Pope to Constantinople reminds them of 1204, the Fourth Crusade. When John Paul II went to Athens in 2001, Metropolitan Christodoulos, who hadn't been enthusiastic about the Pope's visit, asked him when the Catholics were going to acknowledge responsibility for the sack of the city by the Crusaders in 1204. This was not just a matter of an army getting out of hand; after the capture of the city, the Catholics threw out the Greek bishops and replaced them with Latins. So the deep distrust of the Orthodox for the Catholics there goes back at least 800 years.

Istanbul has other shadows. The massacre of the Armenians in 1915. All over the Armenian quarter in Jerusalem you can often see on the walls reminders of the statistics and maps of where the massacres occurred. From the Turkish side, denial.

Earlier this year a courageous Turkish novelist was tried in court for asserting that there had been a massacre of the Armenians by the Turks. He was only released following massive protests from the European Union.

It is only in the last 13 years that the CC has called for this confession of the Catholic sins of the past. Why did he do it from 1994 on? For the Pope it was a key element in the preparation of the Church for the new millennium. **Without confession and repentance we are condemned to repeat the patterns of the last millennium** (more on this teaching tomorrow). We have to break out of the vicious cycles of violence, of hatred and of suspicion. This is only possible by confession and a change of heart.

We shall look into this teaching of John Paul II during these days. But what it is fundamentally saying is this: **What happened in the past has a lot to do with what is happening today**. How are we shaped by our past? Our national past, our church past? How do we escape from the vicious circle of constant repetition of past sufferings and evils?

Does this message of John Paul II then have greater relevance now than in the past? I think the answer has to be Yes:

1. The result of **globalisation**; mass media, internet; of mutual interdependence for materials, goods, trade, cash flow, etc. Each local tribal conflict has a potential to impact the world. For some, wider travel broadens the mind, and opens people up beyond nationalist thinking.
2. The power of films, videos, use of cell phones in riot situations; the strategy of Al Qaeda. Instruments for spreading propaganda, lies, distortions (cf. Pope's remarks in Regensburg).
3. The world context since Sept 11, 2001. Much less safe world. The powerless realise they can have more impact than they thought. Long suppressed angers are surfacing and being exploited. So age-old resentments can be rekindled with amazing speed.

Look at any of the big conflict spots in the world:

Serbia and Croatia
 Israeli and Palestinian
 Singhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka
 Tutu and Hutsi in Rwanda
 Irish Republicans and Ulster Unionists in N. Ireland
 East Timor and Indonesia

Bordering Hungary is the former republic of Yugoslavia, which has now divided into six autonomous republics. Conflict between Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs goes back over 600 years. It might have seemed that hostilities had fizzled out with

the long period of Tito's rule, but suddenly the whole thing falls apart and all the old mentalities, prejudices and hatreds reappear. It could easily erupt again in Kosovo.

It is tragic to see today the chaos in Iraq. The violence between Shiites and Sunnis can in just a few days or weeks create communal myths that may take centuries to destroy and break down. In their rage, their grief and their hopelessness they construct their own stories that they will tell to their children.

The place where there may have been the most Christian prayer for peace and reconciliation is Northern Ireland. The Corrymeela Community organising holidays together for the children of both sides; the Christian Renewal Centre in Rostrevor; the Maranatha Community founded in England by a Methodist and a Catholic. However, the prayer initiatives do not attract the attention of the media like incidents of violence. Government invitation to Anglican priest, Russ Parker, to speak to experts on healing and reconciliation.

A story from the Bible

2 Samuel 5: 1 – 3. “Behold, we are your bone and flesh.”

2 Samuel 15: 1 – 6: The treachery of Absalom. “Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.”

2 Samuel 20: 1: The rebellion of Bichri. “We have no portion in David, and we have no inheritance in the son of Jesse; every man to his tents, O Israel.”

1 Kings 12: 16: The rebellion against Rehoboam: “What portion do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel!”