

Priests' Conference, Hungary, November 2006

The Catholic Church, Human Dignity and Confession of Sin

Morning Session: Tuesday Nov. 28

Before getting into the specific question of confessing the sins of the past, it is important to see what first made this possible in the Catholic Church and then in effect required it.

The Catholic Church of the 19th century had found itself under attack – it seemed from all sides. The Protestant attacks of the Counter-Reformation had been followed by a kind of religious truce but not reconciliation; and that had made way for the attacks on all revealed religion during the Age of Reason. So in the 19th century the Church was defending herself against humanist attacks that saw religion as an imprisonment of humanity. So we get Pius IX condemning freedom of conscience, rejecting democracy, because these were being invoked against the Church. For the humanists freedom of conscience meant emancipation from the Church, from Church authority and Church teaching. This was of course all linked with the defense of the papal states and the temporal power of the Pope.

This period really came to an end with the loss of the Papal States in 1870 and the death of Pius IX in 1878. The Church was on the defensive. The Church was defending her own rights against the State, against rationalist attacks, and was not concerned with the rights of all human beings. So in this climate, the idea that Catholics would confess their sins against others (Orthodox, Protestants, Muslims, etc.) would have been unthinkable. Although deep-rooted mentalities only change slowly, there was a definite change with the election of Leo XIII in 1878. First, Leo XIII had spent a short time in Belgium as papal nuncio, and he was deeply disturbed by the conditions of the workers. This was a major impetus in the origin of Catholic Social Teaching under Pope Leo. Here for the first time in the modern world, the Pope is concerned with the moral order in the world, and with the rights of all workers, not just Catholic workers.

The currents of renewal in Catholic theology and practice that will culminate in the Second Vatican Council begin to develop – though at that time few realize the connection between them. Greater attention to biblical studies (from Leo XIII in 1893); the beginnings of liturgical renewal with the ideal of full participation of all the people (versus celebrant and assisting) under Pius X; the beginnings of the lay apostolate under Pius XI; the canonisation of Therese of Lisieux by Pius XI in 1925; the great encyclicals of Pius XII on Scripture, liturgy and the Church. *Mystici Corporis Christi* shifts the focus from the institutional to the organic and spiritual and restores a more biblical basis to ecclesiology.

Most of the planks in the conciliar renewal were already taking shape. The groundwork for *Lumen Gentium* was in place. The ecumenical dimension was in preparation but Rome was slower to take the lead on this. The attention to the Jews awaited the arrival of John XXIII. But the key element that was still to come was the transformed thinking about the human. The inherited scholastic method focused on nature and the “essence” of things. Moral right and moral wrong were determined by accordance with or opposition to “nature”. This approach did not do justice to the uniqueness of the human person, who is characterized by the capacity to love and to form relationships within society. While it was at Vatican Two that the change in anthropology took place, it was from the 1940s that the new understanding was being shaped in a small philosophical laboratory. Fr Karol Wojtyla understood profoundly that Communism was an attack on authentic humanity. He saw that the existing Catholic philosophy of man was not adequate. What was needed was a distinctively Christian understanding of the human that united the unique dignity of each person with the social solidarity promoting justice and peace. A philosophy that understood the appeal of Marxism with its understanding of the collective and the economic, but which did not subordinate the dignity of each person to an imagined social ideal.

So when it was decided to produce a document on the Church ad extra (in the world), Archbishop Wojtyla was appointed to the drafting committee. However the new Pope Paul VI was already very sympathetic to this project, and before GS was completed he published his first encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964). The three tasks for the Church are: Self-Awareness, Renewal and Dialogue. A greater self-awareness of the Church, both of her riches and of her needs, leads to renewal. Renewal requires and leads to dialogue.

The Pope grounds dialogue in the character of God and of the Lord Jesus. “God Himself took the initiative in the dialogue of salvation. ‘He has first loved us.’ (1 John 4: 10). We, therefore, must be the first to ask for a dialogue with men, without waiting to be summoned to it by others.” (para. 72). So, for Paul VI, dialogue has to be the way of the Catholic Church. He would have been well aware that dialogue had not been prominent in the past comportment of the Catholic Church. Maybe this is why he makes a specific point of dialogue being “catholic”. “The dialogue of salvation was made accessible to all. It applied to everyone without distinction. Hence our dialogue too should be as universal as we can make it. That is to say, it must be catholic”. (para. 76).

So *Gaudium et Spes* outlines a vision of the human that unlike previous moral theology integrated the theological and the philosophical, that treats first of “The Dignity of the Human Person” (Part I, Chapter 1). The integration of Christology into the Christian vision of the human.

The other key document for advance here was the Declaration on Religious Liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*), which united two distinct streams of concern in the Council. (1) The concerns of the bishops suffering under Communist oppression, esp the Polish bishops, who wanted a strong statement of the rights of personal conscience over and

against oppressive state authority. (2) The concerns of the bishops of the USA, for whom the separation of church and state was very important; and who were deeply troubled about the widespread practice of the CC refusing rights to Protestants in Catholic nations, but claiming this right for Catholics in Protestant and Muslim lands.

So the Declaration on Religious Liberty has two main thrusts, both essential for the proper flourishing of the human person. The first is the right to exercise one's religious faith in society, and to be free from state control and coercion. The Catholic authorities had often protested in the past against secular interference in Church affairs, but earlier protests had been conflicts of authority: Pope versus Emperor and Church versus State. Now there is a different focus: a deeper understanding of Church and society is formulated with its foundation in the dignity and the uniqueness of the human person.

The second thrust of *Dignitatis Humanae* is the insistence that "the act of faith is of its very nature a free act" (para. 10). Therefore, "nobody is to be forced to embrace the faith against his will" (para. 10). This recognition has many implications: all kinds of pressure to "convert" are to be avoided.

So with the Council we have a teaching on the human person and society that is still not fully developed, but will be during the pontificate of John Paul II. In the Council's teaching we have many principles established in a new way: concerning dialogue, concerning human freedom, concerning the work of God's grace beyond the Catholic Church.

The Church of the last forty years has been coming to terms with these changes. The Catholic Church has become a foremost defender of all human rights throughout the world. This is a new phenomenon.

Decree on Ecumenism did not really call for a repentance of the sins of the past, but it is kind of implicit. "Consequently, if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies in moral conduct or in Church discipline, or even in the way that Church teaching has been formulated These should be set right at the opportune moment and in the proper way." (para. 6).

It was not the time then to look back at the consequences of our not always having lived by these principles. The fact that the Church had not always opposed conversions by force or coercion; the fact that Protestants had been denied any rights in some Catholic countries because "error has no rights"; the fact that the Church had used state power to enforce religious conformity.

What has happened is that the foundational principles set out in Vatican Two have now established roots in the CC, and we are seeing more clearly the implications of them.