

Vatican Two and the Renewal of the Church

Part Two: October 25 - 26, 2006

2. Repentance for the Sins of the Past

The topics I treated last year and yesterday evening all concerned the teaching and decisions made at the Second Vatican Council. Tonight I want to speak about a topic that was made possible by the Council, but which in its clear expression is a post-conciliar development, the work of John Paul II. I refer to Catholic confession of the sins of the past.

1. The First Steps

The Council did not specifically call for a confession of the sins of the past. But it opened the door. We can say that the logic of the Decree on Ecumenism leads to such a confession. So, for example, the Decree states early on: “But in subsequent centuries much more serious dissensions appeared and large communities became separated from full communion with the Catholic Church – for which, often enough, men of both sides were to blame.” (para. 3). It is in paras 6 to 8 that the Council made its own the “spiritual ecumenism” of the Abbé Paul Couturier from Lyon, France (1881 – 1953) emphasising how “Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling.” (para. 6). In this vision, “there can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior conversion” (para. 7). The Catholic Church accepts in effect the traditional Protestant slogan “Ecclesia semper reformanda” when it is said: “Christ summons the Church, as she goes her pilgrim way, to that continual reformation of which she always has need, insofar as she is an institution of men here on earth.” (para. 6). “Consequently, if, in various time and circumstances, there have been deficiencies in moral conduct or in Church discipline, or even in the way that Church teaching has been formulated – to be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself – these should be set right at the opportune moment and in the proper way.” (para. 6).

The first fruit of this new recognition appeared when Pope Paul VI met with Patriarch Athenagoras in December 1965. They made what they called “this reciprocal act of justice and forgiveness” when they stated together:

“They regret the offensive words, the reproaches without foundation and the reprehensible gestures which on both sides marked or accompanied the sad events of that period;

“They also regret and wish to erase from the memory and midst of the Church the sentences of excommunication which followed them, and whose memory has acted as an obstacle to a rapprochement in charity ...”.

Already here there is a recognition of the important role of memory, that John Paul II will later pick up and develop. The healing of memories was also mentioned in a message of Paul VI on the 700th anniversary of the Council of Lyon (1274).

2. John Paul II's Call for a Confession of the Sins of the Past

But it was really in the preparations for the Great Jubilee of the year 2,000 that John Paul II took up this theme of the sins of the past and the need for a purification of memories. The awareness of the importance of the year 2,000 was present from the start of John Paul II's pontificate. He mentions the Jubilee year in the first para of his first encyclical. He understood that it was his task to lead the Church into the 21st century and the 3rd millennium. However, it was not until 1993 that John Paul II took up the issue of confessing the sins of the past. That year the Pope had a meeting of all the Cardinals and he outlined his ideas about such a confession. He made this thinking public the next year (1994) in his letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, saying that the Church "cannot cross the threshold of the new millennium without encouraging her children to purify themselves through repentance of past errors and instances of infidelity, inconsistency and slowness to act." (TMA, para. 33). The Jubilee is a time of repentance and restoration. The end of the second millennium required a reflection and repentance for the sins of this time: without such a repentance, we will be condemned to repeat the sins and horrors of the second millennium in the third.

In this letter, the Pope mentions two particular patterns of sin that need to be confessed. First, sins against unity: "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). Secondly, the use of violence: "Another painful chapter of history to which the sons and daughters of the Church must return with a spirit of repentance is that of the acquiescence given, especially in certain centuries, to intolerance and even the use of violence in the service of truth." (TMA, para. 35).

This call of John Paul II for a confession by Catholics of the sins of the past is something new in the history of the Church. Because this was a new issue in Catholic theology, the Pope asked his International Theological Commission to study it more thoroughly. The result of their work is the document entitled *Memory and Reconciliation*, issued in March 2000. While MR is not a document of the magisterium, it carries more weight than the writings of individual theologians. In Part I, MR treats of the background history as far as the magisterium of the Church is concerned. It indicates that what is new is not the acknowledgment that the life of the Catholic Church has been defiled by sin, though such acknowledgments have not been common in recent centuries, but the call to the whole Church as a **task** to undertake.

What led the Holy Father to make this unprecedented call? First, I think it came out of his profound reflection upon the great evils under which he had lived, and the

lifelong struggle to provide an effective Christian answer. Secondly, it came out of his heart for renewal of the Church and of society. He knew that authentic renewal requires conversion, and conversion requires the confession of sin and repentance. But thirdly, I think that the Holy Father was particularly aware of the evils committed through the centuries against the Jewish people. Probably the deepest reason for the appreciation of the Jewish people for John Paul II was their sense that unlike the vast majority of Christians, he understood their history of suffering. This link between the call for the confession of the sins of the past and the sins against the Jewish people is indicated by the fact that immediately after the issue of TMA, the Pope set up two study commissions in preparation for the Great Jubilee, one to study the Catholic treatment of the Jewish people through the ages, and the second to study the Inquisition.

The Holy Father returned to this theme of repentance in his encyclical letter on ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint* of 1995. Here the Pope introduces a new component into ecumenical dialogue: dialogue as a corporate examination of conscience. Referring to 1 John 1: 10, he says: "Such a radical exhortation to acknowledge our condition as sinners ought also to mark the spirit which we bring to ecumenical dialogue." (UUS, para. 34). Here the Pope brings the Church's relationship to God into his vision for ecumenical encounter. "Dialogue cannot take place merely on a horizontal level, being restricted to meetings, exchanges of points of view or even the sharing of gifts proper to each Community. It also has a primarily vertical thrust, directed towards the One, who, as the Redeemer of the world and the Lord of history, is himself our Reconciliation." (UUS, para. 35).

From this God-centred vision comes a deep spiritual insight: it is the acknowledgment that "we are men and women who have sinned ... which creates in brothers and sisters living in Communities not in full communion with each other that interior space where Christ, the source of the Church's unity, can effectively act, with all the power of his Spirit, the Paraclete." (UUS, para. 35). When we sin against each other, whether with physical or verbal violence, we cause wounds that act as barriers to trust and communication. We become closed in on ourselves in hurt, in suspicion and in hostility. We build barriers in our hearts. The wounds prevent us from seeing the face of Christ in the other who wounded us. The wounds diminish us as Christians. We are less free to act in the Spirit of Christ. We easily yield to a spirit of judgment and condemnation. As we confess and repent for our sins, the Lord creates a space in our hearts, the "interior space" of which the Pope speaks, and this allows the Holy Spirit to act in a creative way.

3. The Purification of Memory

The Holy Father has identified the purpose of this confession of past sins as "**the purification of memory**". I see this point as a significant development in Catholic teaching. In the document officially convening the Jubilee Year, *Incarnationis Mysterium* (1998), he identified "the purification of the memory" as one of the signs of the mercy of God at work in the Jubilee. "It requires of all an act of courage and of

humility to recognize the faults committed by those who have borne and who bear the name of Christian.” (IM, para. 11). After speaking of the holiness of the Church, the Pope said that, even though we do not carry personal responsibility for these sins, “we bear the weight of the mistakes and the faults of those who went before us” (IM, para. 11). Memory is how the past is received into the present to shape the future.

In the document *Memory and Reconciliation*, the Theological Commission explains in its Introduction that: “This purification aims at liberating personal and communal conscience from all forms of resentment and violence that are the legacy of past faults”. We should note the mention here of both “personal” and “communal” memories. There are the memories we have as individual persons, there are family memories, there are tribal memories, there are national memories, and of course there are parallels to all these within the Church. In all human strife, the most dangerous memories are the communal, because this is how a people or a nation interprets its past: how it remembers the conflicts, how the history of the nation is written, who are identified as enemies. It is in our histories that commonly we justify our past 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 humour, in memorials and in annual days of remembrance with special ceremonies, often with processions. In these memories the sinful element in the conflicts is perpetuated. We glorify “our heroes”, and excuse their atrocities; and we vilify the other side, for whom no excuses are made and in whose heroes we see nothing good.

The only way that the enmities of centuries can be removed is by the identification of our own sin, by a repentance of heart and the resulting purification of our memories. The identification of our sin has many components, just as our sin took many forms: sins of lack of love, leading to hatred, to vilification, to calumnies and lies, to misrepresentation, and then to forms of public oppression, including violence. The lies and distortions in our histories have to be corrected.

Some of this has been going on at a scholarly level within the ecumenical movement over the last sixty years. An obvious example is the way that Catholic historians and theologians treated the life and influence of Martin Luther. Until the mid-20th century, the Catholic books on Luther were uniformly negative, emphasising everything negative and detailing the “errors” of his teaching. It is only in the last 60 years that there have begun to be more objective studies of Luther by Catholic scholars.

4. Some Protestant Initiatives in this Area

But it is important for us Catholics to realise that key initiatives for the confession of past sins have been made by some Protestant leaders, primarily within the charismatic movement. They do not seem to have been influenced at all by the initiative of John Paul II, and indeed the Protestant impulse here pre-dates the Pope’s call to Catholics. Interestingly the Protestant developments arose as impulses sensed to be from the

Holy Spirit for reconciliation in particular long-standing conflicts. Examples are the visits made in 1995 by German Christians to countries occupied by Nazi Germany; prayer repentance journeys to the slave ports of West Africa; repentance between the British and the Irish; repentance on the massacre sites of American Indians, a parallel initiative regarding the Aborigines of Australia; prayer gatherings in Berlin and in Africa to repent for the dividing up of Africa by the European colonial powers. In these initiatives, a teaching on “identificational repentance” or “representative confession” developed out of the thorough preparations that were made for these events. It was, we may say, a “theology on the run”, not a teaching first developed in universities and theological faculties. Particular attention has been paid to the representative confessions of sin found in Nehemiah 9 and in Daniel 9, as well as in Jer. 3: 25 and 14: 20. Here the persons of Nehemiah and Daniel, both presented as obedient and righteous men among the Jews, confess the sins of their people with whom they fully identify. “We and our fathers have sinned.” They have emphasised the importance place of fasting in such spiritual engagements.

I believe that it is important for there to be a coming together and a mutual interaction between the Protestant practical initiatives and the Catholic response to the call of John Paul II. The Protestant circles involved are strong on practice, which is the area where we as Catholics are still weak. There needs to be a coming together of the Catholic teaching on “purification of memories” and the Protestant pastoral and spiritual practice. The Protestant teaching is mostly an application of some biblical stories, whereas the Catholic teaching has a philosophical (anthropological) basis in the dignity of the human person in society within history.

In particular, the Catholic teaching on purification of memory gives a profound answer to the objection: How can we and why should we repent for the sins of past centuries for which we had no responsibility? The answer is that through memory especially of groups and peoples, we today make our own the sins of the past when we receive the distorted histories, the prejudices, the biased culture and make them our own. This puts the practical emphasis not so much on trying to put ourselves into the position of people hundreds of years ago, but on examining the history to see how we have defended, excused and perhaps gloried in the sins of our ancestors, both of nation and of Church.

The Protestants, being primarily from free church backgrounds (though with German Lutheran and English Anglican exceptions), have focused on national and tribal conflicts, and have not addressed the issues concerning Christian division, which feature prominently in the thinking of John Paul II. Perhaps the two come together in repentance for the Christian sins of the past against the Jewish people.

So far, the Catholic confessions of past sin have been very general and formal at the level of the Pope and occasionally of Cardinals and Episcopal Conferences. There has been a recent example between the Episcopal conferences of Hungary and of Slovakia. So for example the Hungarian Bishops stated on June 29, 2006:

Now, when we stand before the face of Christ, examine our conscience and pray for our spiritual renewal, we ask for God's mercy and forgiveness for all of those shameful deeds done against those peoples throughout history, living in this region due to their ethnic, national, lingual or cultural identity. It is with great sadness with which we remember those instances when Hungarian people caused great pain for the people and communities of Slovak origin. At the same time, we renew in the face of God, the sentiment of reconciliation and deep respect, the very same sentiment of love and forgiveness, which our people needed to experience in the past, due to personal or communal suffering. We forgive and ask for forgiveness.

This statement sets a good example, especially if it is communicated to the people. But it is so general that it is difficult to see it leading immediately to changed heart attitudes.