

Towards a Deeper Repentance for Our Sins against the Jewish People

All those who are gathered now in Jerusalem for this important gathering have come in a spirit of repentance, responding to the invitation to “Change the Future by Confronting the Past.” As the invitation states, “We are coming to Jerusalem as Christians gathered from the nations, to confess the arrogance and persecution that has so often characterised the relationship of the Church to the Jewish people, and to stand alongside the Jewish people as they remember the Holocaust.”

In this paper, I want to examine different elements involved in a deeper repentance. Some of these elements apply to deeper repentance for any sin, whilst others apply specifically to a deeper repentance for sins committed against the Jewish people.

I: Recognition, Confession and Lamentation

Here we are dealing with the human response to evil, particularly to evil that is socially embodied and influences many generations. This is a process from the head to the heart to the “guts,” what the French call “les entrailles”. The main steps in this deepening process can be called recognition, confession and lamentation.

Recognition is the acceptance that particular actions and behaviour in the past were evil. It is a statement about historic events, not simply about my/our reaction to historic events. It means saying: these things happened, and they were morally wrong. Recognition can be made by anyone with a conscience.

Confession involves an acknowledgment of sin, and thus of an offence against God. Confession of sin involves an asking for forgiveness; thus Pope John Paul II said in relation to the Great Jubilee of the year 2000: “As the successor of Peter, I ask that in this year of mercy the Church, strong in the holiness which she receives from her Lord, should kneel before God and implore forgiveness for the past and present sins of her sons and daughters.”¹ (Note 1) Confession and the request for forgiveness can be made by anyone who believes in the one God and creator of all, but for Christians it means asking for the forgiveness-cleansing made possible by the saving death of Jesus Christ.

Lamentation involves a grieving of the whole person. There is not just a recognition of evil and an explicit confession of sin, but a response of heart and affections to the horror of the sin. Lamentation is in fact one of the forms of Israelite/Jewish prayer that developed from Israel’s acute sense of the holiness of the one God and of God’s total claim upon his people. It is vividly described in the book of Lamentations: My eyes are spent with weeping; my soul is in tumult; my heart is poured out in grief

¹ *Incarnationis mysterium*, para. 11 (cited in *Memory and Reconciliation*, Introduction). The Vatican document on *Memory and Reconciliation* sees the purpose of this acknowledgment as the “purification of memory”. “This purification aims at liberating personal and communal conscience from all forms of resentment and violence that are the legacy of past faults, through a renewed historical and theological evaluation of such events.” (Introduction).

because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because infants and babes faint in the streets of the city.” (Lam. 2: 11).

The process of repentance needs to go through these three phases. It is clear that one has to begin with a recognition of what happened and its wrongness. But this recognition needs to become a confession of sin, and then this confession of sin has to move from the head to the heart and the guts. It is only as our repentance reaches the level of lamentation that it will go as deep in the human psyche as the sinful behaviour being lamented. The full restoration of right relationships requires that all repentance has to reach the same human depth and intensity as the sins that are being confessed. In this light, it would seem that much of the Christian world is only at the stage of initial recognition of the evils inflicted upon the Jewish people, with only a minority having progressed to the level of confession of sin and an explicit asking for forgiveness.

The Process of Increasing Identification

Confessions of past sin may or may not assert a continuity between the past and the present, though the move from recognition to confession ordinarily involves acknowledging a degree of responsibility.² (Note 2) Confession involves uttering a “We”: “We confess”. Although the Vatican document on *Memory and Reconciliation* does not speak of “identification”, it is in fact addressing the move from “They” to “We” expressed by the term “identification”.³ (Note 3)

Identification involves the assertion of an identity between the present generation and its predecessors. The classic biblical expression of this identification is the statement of Jeremiah “We and our fathers have sinned.” (Jer. 3: 25). For Jeremiah, this was an identification with the whole people of Israel. The contemporary Christian confession that “we and our fathers have sinned” in regard to our treatment of the Jewish people involves an element of identification with the Christian past.

The question of the degree of responsibility that can be inherited from the sins of previous generations is not a simple one. Each person is answerable for their sin, and for no one else’s. This was the revelation to Ezekiel: “The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the

² The Vatican document on *Memory and Reconciliation* distinguishes four categories of biblical confession (para. 2.1): (i) when the entire people confesses or alludes to its sins against God without any reference to the sins of preceding generations; (ii) when the confession of the current sins of the people is placed upon the lips of one or more leaders, who may or may not include themselves among the sinful people; (iii) when the people or one of their leaders mention the sins of their forefathers without referring to the present generation; (iv) when there is confession of the faults of the forebears, with an express linkage to the errors of the present generation. Category (iv) is the most frequent in the Old Testament.

³ It is John Dawson, the Gentile co-chair of the Toward Jerusalem Council II initiative, who has developed a schematic teaching on “identificational repentance”. The British Anglican, Russ Parker, prefers to speak of “representative confession”.

wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.” (Ez. 18: 20). However, no person is an island, and each person belongs to a society, is shaped by that society and contributes, however slightly, to that society. Thus the sin of a person is never restricted to their individual behaviour, but includes their absorption of the evils of their family, their tribe, their society, their nation. The Vatican document *Memory and Reconciliation* here makes a distinction between the “subjective responsibility” of each person, which is non-transferable, and an “objective responsibility” that is handed on “to which one may freely adhere subjectively or not”.⁴ (Note 4) While some such distinction as this is obviously needed, it may be asked whether this formulation does justice to the process by which evil attitudes, false ideas and disordered emotions are transmitted from one generation to another.⁵ (Note 5)

It is also necessary to reflect upon the relationship between our generic belonging to the human race and our particular belonging to this tribe, this nation, this faith-community. We are, it would seem, members of the human race through becoming members of the particular: first, as children of a particular mother and father. This means, I believe, that we have a particular responsibility to repent for the sins of our family, of our nation, of our faith-community. Yet because we are all members of the one human race, we cannot appeal to our particularity to say to others that our sins are none of your business.

There is then a particular responsibility for us to repent for the sins of our particular communities against the Jewish people: the sins of our nations or people-groups (British, German, Spanish, Polish), the sins of our churches and Christian groupings (Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Evangelical [in the English-language sense]). It is important that we respect each other as fellow human beings and that we respect each other in our particular identities. As an Englishman I am conscious both of the sins of the English against the Jews, and of the sins of other peoples. But I have to start with those of my own people. Otherwise there is something unreal and abstract about my declarations.

The church identification is in some ways more difficult and more complicated than the national. But in many ways the repentance of our churches is even more basic, because the teaching, preaching and rulings of our churches contributed in such a

⁴ “Subjective responsibility ceases with the death of the one who performed the act; it is not transmitted through generation; the descendants do not inherit (subjective) responsibility for the acts of their ancestors. In this sense, asking for forgiveness presupposes a contemporaneity between those who are hurt by an action and those who committed it. The only responsibility capable of continuing in history can be the objective kind, to which one may freely adhere subjectively or not. Thus, the evil done often outlives the one who did it through the consequences of behaviours that can become a heavy burden on the consciences and memories of the descendants.” (5. 1).

⁵ More reflection is needed here on the New Testament data, particularly from the Gospels, concerning the guilt of a particular “generation”. “Truly, I say to you, all this will come upon this generation.” (Matt. 23: 36). What do the words of Jesus mean: “Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.” (Matt. 23: 32)? Is the case of the generation of Jesus himself summing up the guilt of previous generations unique in history? The best treatment I know of this issue is in Louis Ligier, SJ *Péché d’Adam et Péché du Monde* (Paris; Editions Mouton, 1961), pp. 117 – 154.

major way to the evils inflicted on the Jews. I became aware of how sensitive an issue this is during a week of prayer and fasting involving both Protestant and Catholic Christians that addressed the sins of Christians, in particular of Rome, towards the Jewish people. When we began repenting for the sins of the fourth and following centuries and those who confidently led the way were Evangelical Protestants, the Catholics largely fell silent. It was clear that they experienced the prayers of the Protestants about the early centuries as an indirect attack on their Church.

In many ways those of us now involved in identificational repentance are all beginners. Perhaps the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary are the least inexperienced. I sense that much purification is needed – purification from arrogance and from insensitivity – not only towards the Jewish people but towards our fellow Christians in relation to the Jews. Thus I would say that in particular expressions of repentance we have to allow a priority to the members of the Church primarily responsible for the evils being confessed. But in turn we cannot say to other Christians that the sins of our Church are not their business. In relation to the sins of the first Christian millennium the Catholic and Orthodox Churches bear the greatest responsibility. Other Christians identify with the Church of the first millennium according to their understanding of the Church and their acceptance of the heritage of those centuries.

Theologically, it would seem that the following principles are foundational. First, that Jesus was able to identify with the whole human race and die for all, because he first identified with his own people, and suffered for them.⁶ (Note 6) Secondly, it is through the identification of Jesus that we are saved: that he “was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4: 25). This identification was the living out of his God-given identity. It is above all an act of love. Thirdly, this love of Jesus for all humans, while obviously an expression of his sinlessness, grew up in the context of his love for his own – his own family, his own local community and synagogue. Thirdly, our identification is then the living out of our God-given identity. This is an intrinsic element in the Christian calling to love.

Thus, identification is a life-time commitment, not an intercessory technique. In the identification of Jesus, he “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Phil. 2: 7). The identifications to which the Holy Spirit leads us are permanent forms of commitment and self-giving. It is a deeper discovery of our own God-given identity. Identification is a spiritual act and it is costly. Identification represents a solidarity of will and affections. Identification with other peoples than our own presupposes a real depth in our own identification and a maturity of love.

⁶ The “we” and “us” of Isaiah 53 almost certainly refer to Israel, and not directly to all humanity. We should interpret verse 6 “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” in the light of verse 8 “he was cut off out of the land of the living stricken for the transgression of my people”. Jesus then fulfils the priestly calling of Israel to be a blessing to all peoples.

A few years ago I took part in a prayer journey to Spain as part of the Toward Jerusalem Council Two initiative.⁷ (Note 7) I know that the Lord truly blessed that very difficult trip. But I also feel that we made several mistakes. I think we suffered from the tendency among some Evangelicals to pay insufficient attention to the human dimension and to imagine we could all readily identify with the historic Church through sincerely-intended declarations. We did not pay enough attention to the need for a Spanish Catholic repentance to be at the core of what we did.

Repentance as Changed Behaviour towards the Jews

A deeper repentance has also to include a deeper grasp of the evil of the various forms of sinful behaviour and thinking against the Jewish people. If we love the Jewish people and want to enter into a deeper expression of sorrow for the wrongs done to them, we have to find out more about how they were treated, and then allow the horror of this to sink in. What does this add to what I have already said about identification? It adds the need for a fleshing-out of the content of our repentance for our anti-Jewish behaviour.

We have to allow ourselves to enter imaginatively into the horrendous events of Christian history. We have to open ourselves to grasp what was involved in the hatred, the arrogance and the scorn heaped upon the Jews; what was involved in the lies and the calumnies, in the spiteful denunciations, as well as in the creation of malicious myths; what was involved in the violence, the cruelty and the torture; what was involved in the oppression of consciences, in forcing a deeply ethical people to live double lives; what was involved in the expulsion of the Jews from nations and cities, and in the confiscation of property; what was involved in the destruction of Jewish family life and culture.

Some may ask if it is really necessary to trawl through the cess-pits of history. I am convinced that it is necessary, because it is the one way that the Holy Spirit so impresses the evil of these events on our hearts that we are being transformed by this realisation. Perhaps this is discovering what any form of repentance ought to be. But because these sins were committed against God's chosen, whom He loves, they focus for us with a particular intensity the baseness of which we are all capable, including sincere believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.⁸ (Note 8)

⁷ Toward Jerusalem Council Two is an initiative originally of two Messianic Jews in the United States, to work for the future realisation of a second Council of Jerusalem at that the Church of the nations will in inverse manner to the first Council in Acts 15 recognise and welcome back the Church of the circumcision.

⁸ I would like to register here a protest against the tendency of some to deny that the persecutors of the Jews were Christians, or to speak of them as "so-called Christians" or "nominal Christians". This ultimately trivialises the sin: for whilst there were undoubtedly many persecutors who were not in any meaningful sense followers of Jesus, there were many who were seen as models of sanctity in their day, as for example John Chrysostom and Vincent Ferrer.

A deep repentance for the sins of the Christian people against the Jews is profoundly transforming. As we face the various forms of evil inflicted upon them, we are being changed into the opposite. We could say that we are being made righteous by the grace of the Messiah. There is something profound in the Jewish and Israeli use of the term “righteous among the nations” for those Gentiles who risked their lives to protect and save Jewish people.

Three Stages of Repentance

Another form of deepening in Christian repentance concerns the levels of offence committed against the Jewish people. In this respect I suggest that there may be three main levels of repentance: (i) for anti-Semitism; (ii) for the replacement teaching; and (iii) for the loss of the Jewish expression of the church. It would seem that this is both the order of discovery and the order of deepening repentance

1. Repentance for Anti-Semitism

At this first level, there is a recognition of the evil of anti-Semitism, of the wrongness of hatred for the Jewish people and of all forms of anti-Jewish prejudice. Anti-Semitism is seen as a form of racism, which offends against human dignity and the rights of peoples.

This evil can be recognised and confessed by any person or group of people, irrespective of race or religious faith. It is at this level that most of the repudiations of anti-Semitism by Christian churches have been formulated. Whilst I see this level as just the first step, it should not be regarded as merely preliminary to the real repentance. For this level grounds the sin of anti-Semitism in the human, at the level of creation.

2. Repentance for Replacement Teaching

The second level of repentance for Christian sins against the Jewish people concerns the evil of replacement teaching and all associated and resulting attitudes. As you know, the repentance teaching always takes some such form as this:

- a. God has rejected the Jewish people because they rejected Jesus as their Messiah.
- b. God has therefore abolished the covenant with Israel.
- c. The Church has taken Israel’s place as the covenanted people.
- d. The promises once given to Israel no longer belong to the Jewish people but to the Christian Church.

As an increasing number of church leaders and theologians are now recognising, the replacement teaching is not true to the New Testament. The most explicit rejection of this teaching is found in Romans 11, where Paul explicitly posed the question: “I ask, then, has God rejected his people?” (11: 1), to which he gives the clear response “By no means!” Paul’s argument is that “at the present time there is a

remnant, chosen by grace” (11: 5), that is to say, there are Israelites who have believed in Jesus as their Messiah. So, Paul says, “What then? Israel failed to obtain what it sought. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened.” (11: 7). So, Paul then asks the inevitable question: “have they stumbled so as to fall?” and gives the same answer, “By no means.” (11: 11). Those who have become hardened will not remain hardened for ever: “a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number [the *pleroma*] of the Gentiles come in” (11: 25). So, Paul reaches the definitive formulation: “For the gifts and call of God are irrevocable.” (11: 29).

With this second stage, there enters a **theological** element in the Christian sin. Here we find the reason, a theological reason, for the Christian hatred, prejudice and suspicion. In fact, this reason was later used to turn the sin into an apparent virtue: by despising the Jews, it was said, we are only imitating God, who despises them for their infidelity. It is this theological reason, what was believed to be the uniquely horrific sin of the Jews, that explains both the virulence and the longevity of Christian anti-Semitism.

This sin of replacement theology is fundamentally the sin of usurping God’s role as judge. It is a violation of the teaching of Jesus: “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matt. 7: 1). It is important here to be clear about the difference between judgment and discernment. It is necessary for Christians to exercise discernment, particularly those in positions of leadership; but discernment always concerns the particular (this event, this action, this person) and is never absolute and unconditional (“this action is moved by the Holy Spirit” or “this action is not the work of the Holy Spirit”). Judgment, by contrast, is always absolute and tends to be general and global (“He/she is beyond redemption” or “He/she is evil”). The replacement teaching is a form of absolute judgment (“God has rejected this people”) and represents a human trespassing on the prerogatives of God.

Such a usurpation of God’s role represents one of the worst forms of arrogance. A deeper repentance for our sins against the Jewish people involves a deeper grasp of the degree of arrogance involved in the human decision that God has rejected the Jews. Not only is this judgment a usurpation of God’s prerogatives, but the replacement teaching represents a rejection of the people that God has chosen, a hatred for those whom God loves as “the apple of his eye” (Deut. 32: 10; see also Zech. 2: 8).

We can also see this violation in relating to the inheritance rights of the first-born son, since the Lord said, “Israel is my first-born son.” (Ex. 4: 22). Since from this angle the Gentiles are the younger son, the sin of usurpation is the rejection of the first-born and elder by the younger son and the seizure of his inheritance.

In other words, the replacement teaching is not just a minor mistake in the by-ways of Christian theology, but a major sin against Divine election, a conviction that is at the centre of God’s plan, the mystery hidden from all ages and now revealed to the saints.

3. The Rejection of the Jewish Church

It might seem with a deep penetration of the sin in replacement teaching that we have reached the heart of the Christian sin against the Jewish people. Nonetheless, there is a third stage, which is our repentance for the suppression and loss of the Jewish church, the *ecclesia ex judaeis*.

We know that in the middle of the first century, the church was virtually all Jewish. The twelve apostles were Jewish; Paul was Jewish; James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, was Jewish; Mary, the mother of Jesus, was Jewish. The Council of Jerusalem around the year 50 CE was a Jewish gathering to examine the question of the admission of Gentiles. But by the fourth century, the situation had been totally reversed. The Christians were virtually all Gentiles, and all Jewish converts were required to renounce their Jewish identity and to cease all Jewish practice. One important factor to notice is that whereas the acceptance of replacement teaching involved the assent of preachers and teachers, but never found expression in any credal statement of the faith of the Church, the decisions regarding Jewish members of the Church were the decisions of church synods and councils, mostly local.

The sin of rejecting the Jewish church is a further dimension of the sin against divine election. It was a deviation from God's model for the Church, which was the "one new man" made up of Jew and Gentile in the one body of Christ. Although the Church was protected from a rejection of the Jewish foundation by the inclusion of the Hebrew Scriptures in the Christian Canon, there was a prohibition of an explicitly Jewish expression of faith in Yeshua of Nazareth, the Messiah of Israel. Just as replacement theology led to a hatred of those God loved, so the exclusion of a Jewish expression from the church represented a failure to love and cherish characteristic elements of Jewish faith and culture.

It seems quite likely that the inroads of anti-Jewish sentiment began with some Gentile anti-Semitism of a racist type, which then lent itself to a replacement-rejectionist understanding after the events in Jerusalem in the years 70 and 135 CE, and that this in turn made possible the rejection of the Jewish church. This process would then have had further consequences in reverse: the exclusion of a Jewish presence within the Church solidified the replacement teaching, which with all its accompanying attitudes gave a theological underpinning and virulence to wider anti-Semitism.

While this evil of the suppression of the Jewish expression of the Church obviously has implications for the status of Jewish believers in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, the point does not stand or fall with our attitudes to the Messianic Jews of our day. However, it is difficult to see how a proper recognition of the sin in the suppression of the Jewish expression of the Church can co-exist with the view that Christianity and Judaism are of their nature two entirely separate faiths.

The Purification of Our Repentance

The forms of deepening examined in this paper have several practical consequences for the way that we express this repentance. Each of these consequences points to a necessary area of purification in the way that we think about our repentance and then express it.

1. Truth instead of Lies. The history of the oppression of the Jews has been replete with lies: the foundational lie that God had rejected the Jews (the replacement teaching, on which more below); the lies of anti-Jewish myths (the blood libel, the desecration of the eucharistic host, the poisoning of wells, etc); the lies concerning Jewish greed, the Shylock image. It is essential then that our steps of repentance be based on truth. For this reason, it is vital that in confessing the sins of the past, we do so **accurately and soberly**. Accuracy requires study and expertise. If we do not know, we should wait until we do know. In any case, there are enough horrific things in the history that it does not take a long time to authenticate.
2. Humility instead of Arrogance. Since the whole history of anti-Semitic thought and behaviour has been based on Gentile arrogance, our repentance has to be done in a spirit of humility. This means the avoidance of any form of boasting, whether in our knowledge of the history, our spiritual competence or our achievements in acts of repentance. Particular care should be taken in post-repentance publicity. We should be on guard against speaking as though our ministry and prayer are the sole cause of the fruit of repentance.
3. Identification not Accusation. While the long history of anti-Semitism is a history of accusation, the spiritual remedy lies in identification. The Pope's policy in advancing a repentance for past sins has been to name the sins but not the sinner, because to name the sinner is a form of accusation. When we consider the horror of the Catholic persecution of the Jews and particularly the Marranos in Spain (and later in Portugal), it is very difficult not to harbour an element of accusation. To abhor the evil, to lament the evil without any underlying spirit of accusation requires a kind of crucifixion of the self, a deep separation of ego and spirit.

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