

THE JUBILEE YEAR 'REQUEST FOR PARDON'

On Sunday, March 12, 2000 Pope John Paul II made a unique and historic "request for pardon" for the sins and errors of Christians both throughout the centuries and in the present. This papal act of atonement for past sin is meant to Christians to enter the new millenium better prepared to evangelize the Truth of faith.

Unfortunately, we live at a time where Truth is rarely recognized. The spiritual nature of this public confession made by the pope for the entire Church was misconstrued, misunderstood and twisted to meet political or ideological agendas of those who are hostile to the Church. There have been public responses to the papal apology that confuse repentance for wrong actions with accusations of doctrinal error, or make demands for apologies not required in the historical or cultural context of the events of the past.

The negative secular response to the papal apology can be summed up in an editorial in the March 14, 2000 *New York Times*: "As long as (the Church) was burdened by its failure to reckon with passed misdeeds committed in the name of Catholicism, the Church could not fully heal its relations with other faiths. John Paul has now made it easier to do that. Some of the things (the pope) did not say bear note. The apology was expressed in broad terms. It was offered on behalf of the church's 'sons and daughters' but not the church itself, which is considered holy. Nor did John Paul directly address the sensitive issue of whether past popes, cardinals and clergy – not just parishioners – also erred. The pope's apology for discrimination against women is welcome but difficult to square with his continued opposition to abortion and birth control, and to women in the priesthood. Regrettably, he made no mention of discrimination against

homosexuals. Another noted omission was the lack of a specific reference to the Holocaust...(and) the failure of Pope Pius XII to speak out against the Nazi genocide."

Let's review these charges:

As long as it was burdened by its failure to reckon with past misdeeds committed in the name of Catholicism, the Church could not fully heal its relations with other faiths.

This is a misunderstanding of the purpose of the papal apology. The purpose of the papal atonement for past sin is to allow Christians to enter the new millenium better prepared to evangelize the Truth of faith. In the *Times* statement there is a direct implication of a one-sided nature to the wrongs of the past, an acceptance of an anti-Catholic interpretation of history rooted in post-Reformation and Enlightenment propaganda rather than an accurate and objective understanding of the past. Additionally, while the papal apology is certainly given without equivocation, "it would also be desirable if these acts of repentance would stimulate the members of other religions to acknowledge the faults of their own past."

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The *Times* and other commentators failed to note that the pope has specifically addressed many of the issues which the apology outlined in general. As outlined in a recent analysis by Catholic News Service, in 1982, the pope referred to the "errors of excess" in the Inquisition; the 1998 Vatican document on the Shoah made clear the moral shortcomings within Christians that contributed to the Holocaust; in 1995, the pope, in discussing the Crusades, outlined errors and expressed thanks that dialogue has replaced violence; the pope decried in a 1995 letter the historical discrimination against women and expressed regret that "not a few" members of the Church shared in the blame. The *Times* and other commentators

demand a laundry list of apologies based on prejudicial interpretations of history. While the pope “forgives and asks forgiveness,” there is no similar acknowledgment on the part of these commentators of the biases, conceits and hatreds that often driven their commentaries on the Church. While the pope’s apology asks for no recipocrity, it would do well for institutions such as the *Times* to examine objectively its own motivations in its attacks on the Church and the historical prejudices in which they are rooted.

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This is a two-fold misunderstanding. First, there is a real distinction between a theological understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ, which is holy, and its members that are sinners. Second, the *Times* and other critics are making the common mistake of identifying “the Church” with the hierarchy. “Sons and daughters” of the Church refers to all baptized members of the Church, not “just parishioners.”

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The papal apology dealt with errors rooted in failure to live out the demands of the Gospels in particular historical circumstances. The *Times* and other critics are confusing repentance for certain wrong actions in history with admissions of doctrinal error. The *Times* uses the papal apology as an opportunity to demand that the Church change doctrinal truths for a secular agenda. What the apology could not be, and was not intended to be, was an apology for Church doctrine. Part of the apology, however, was for any inadvertent cooperation Christians may have given that allowed

the persistence in our own time of a culture of death that allows the weak and defenseless, particularly the unborn, to be abused at the hands of the powerful.

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The papal apology was not meant as an endorsement of a contemporary ideological agenda. The apology makes clear that no person should be subject to discrimination and if any in the Christian community cooperate in discrimination, they are in error. However, the Church has always taught that homosexual acts – not homosexuals – are inherently sinful. The *Times* implies that such teaching involves “discrimination against homosexuals.” It does not. Again, the *Times* demands admission of doctrinal error and that Church teaching succumb to an ideological agenda. Such is neither the sum nor substance of the papal apology.

Another noted omission was the lack of a specific reference to the Holocaust

As the recent document on the Shoah made clear, the Holocaust was “the result of the pagan ideology of Nazism, animated by a merciless anti-Semitism that not only despised the faith of the Jewish people, but also denied their very human dignity. Nevertheless, ‘it may be asked whether the Nazi persecution of the Jews was not made easier by the anti-Jewish prejudices imbedded in some Christian minds and hearts.’” The papal apology strongly asserts that “Christians will acknowledge the sins committed by not a few of their number against the people of the covenant.” However, it would be an unhistorical leap for the pope to assent to contemporary anti-Catholic propaganda that attempts to identify the Church with the Holocaust. It is a historical fallacy – and an insult to the memory of the Holocaust – to use this ultimate 20th century evil as a tool for anti-Catholic rhetoric and to thereby mitigate the evil that was pagan Nazism.

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The alleged “failure” of Pope Pius XII “to speak out on Nazi genocide” is a faulty interpretation of both the historical reality and a papacy that saved hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives. The actions and tactics of Pope Pius XII and the Church saved far more Jewish lives than the Allied armies, Allied governments, the Resistance, the Red Cross, other churches and other religions, or any then-existing agency of any kind worldwide combined during the war. The actions of Pius XII hardly need an apology.

The difficulty in such an unprecedented event by Pope John Paul II is that too often history is clouded with the prejudices of those commenting and reporting on it. As evidenced in the *Times* editorial what is assumed to be objective historical understanding of events is often 19th century – and 20th century – anti-Catholic propaganda that has been sanctioned over time as objectively correct. It is conventional wisdom, not historical fact. Careful and objective analysis – free from the prejudices of the past and present – needs to guide our understanding of history.

The Church “is not afraid of the truth that emerges from history and is ready to acknowledge mistakes whenever they have been identified, especially when they involve the respect that is owed to individuals and communities. She is inclined to mistrust generalizations that excuse or condemn various historical periods. She entrusts the investigation of the past to patient, honest, scholarly reconstruction, free from confessional or ideological prejudices, regarding both the accusations brought against her and the wrongs she has suffered.” (*Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*, International Theological Commission, December 1999).

Pope John Paul II’s historic act of atonement is a witness to

guide Catholics into the third millenium. Bigoted commentary, historical distortion, demands for doctrinal abandonment, and anti-Catholic prejudice will not detract from the this unprecedented jubilee "request for pardon."