

# The Jubilee Year “Request for Pardon”

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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. The Holy Father saw this as the culmination of the Church’s “examination of conscience” for the Jubilee Year. The goal of such a public act of repentance is a “purification of memory.” As the Holy Father explained in his Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente* the Jubilee Year should be the occasion for a purification of the memory of the Church from all forms of “errors and instances of infidelity, inconsistency and slowness to act” in the past millenium.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the responsibility of Christians for the evils that exist within our own time must be acknowledged as well.

The “request for pardon” is made in the understanding that “all of us, though not personally responsible and without encroaching on the judgement of God, who alone knows every heart, bear the burden of the errors and faults of those who have gone before us.”<sup>2</sup> This papal act of atonement for past sin is an intensely spiritual act, meant to seek forgiveness from God and allow Christians to enter the new millennium better prepared to evangelize the Truth of faith.

Unfortunately, we live at a time where Truth is rarely recognized, and where 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. Particularly when events in history are raised, “the simple admission of faults committed by the sons

and daughters of the Church may look like acquiescence in the face of accusations made by those who are prejudicially hostile to the Church.”<sup>3</sup> 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 Papal Atonement

At the special Jubilee Mass for the first Sunday of Lent, Pope John Paul II, gave his expression of regret for the entire Church for the following<sup>4</sup>:

1. “Even men of the church, in the name of faith and morals, have sometimes used methods not in keeping with the Gospel in the solemn duty of defending the truth.”

The pope explained that “in certain periods of history Christians have at times given in to intolerance.” He asked that we “seek and promote truth in the gentleness of charity, in the firm knowledge that truth can prevail only in virtue of truth itself.”

“Recognition of the sins which have rent the unity of the Body of Christ and wounded fraternal charity.” The pope asked forgiveness for the breakdown in Christian unity and that “believers have opposed one another, becoming divided, and have mutually condemned one another and fought against one another.”

3. “In recalling the sufferings endured by the people of Israel throughout history, Christians will acknowledge the sins committed by not a few of their number against the people of the covenant.” The pope acknowledged that we are “deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer.”

4. “Repent of the words and attitudes caused by pride, by

hatred, by the desire to dominate others, by enmity toward members of other religions and toward the weakest groups in society.” Pope John Paul II asked forgiveness because “Christians have often denied the Gospel; yielding to a mentality of power, they have violated the rights of ethnic groups and peoples, and shown contempt for their cultures and religious traditions.”

5. “Offenses against...human dignity and...rights (that) have been trampled; let us pray for women, who are all too often humiliated and emarginated.” At times, the pope explained, “the equality of your sons and daughters has not been acknowledged, and Christians have been guilty of rejection and exclusion, consenting to acts of discrimination on the basis of racial and ethnic differences.”

6. “Especially for minors who are victims of abuse, for the poor, the alienated, the disadvantaged; let us pray for those most defenseless, the unborn killed in their mother’s womb or even exploited for experimental purposes by those who abuse the promise of biotechnology and distort the aims of science.” How many times, the pope asked, “have Christians not recognized (Christ) in the hungry, the thirsty and the naked, in the persecuted, the imprisoned and in those incapable of defending themselves, particularly in the first stages of life.” He asked forgiveness for “all those who have committed acts of injustice by trusting in wealth and power and showing contempt for the ‘little ones.’”

### Reaction and response

For the most part, reaction to the papal request for pardon was positive, if one-sided. Most secular editorials – and commentators from various faiths and denominations – commended the Pope for acknowledging the “errors of the Roman Catholic Church over the last 2000 years.” Yet, they failed to see that at the heart of these errors is the fact that Catholics have faltered when they have become caught up in the culture of

their day. Failing to see the world through the eyes of faith, they were caught up in the spirit of their times. The errors that the pope acknowledges are sins that come from the culture, not from a faith lived in unity with the Gospels. Too many commentators seek to imply that the derivation of these errors is the faith itself, rather than a failure of living up to the demands of faith. These sins are the errors Christians share with all mankind that find their roots in society, history and the culture, not in the Gospels: violence in defense of belief, corrosive divisiveness, anti-Semitism, intolerance, racial, gender and ethnic discrimination, and oppression of the poor and defenseless.

The negative secular response to the papal apology can be summed up from 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."

These charges should be reviewed individually:

\*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. It is also a failure to see the wider benefits to all faiths, and non-faiths. The purpose of the papal atonement for past sin is to allow Christians to enter the new millennium 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 is hoped that they will be carried out reciprocally, though at times prophetic gestures may call for a unilateral...initiative."<sup>5</sup> In regard to other religions, "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."<sup>6</sup>

\*The apology was expressed in broad terms.

The *Times* and other commentators failed to note that the pope has specifically addressed many of the issues to which the apology referred in general. 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; in 1987 the pope acknowledged that Christian missionaries too often helped carry out the cultural oppression of native peoples; 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.<sup>7</sup> The *Times* and other commentators demanded a laundry list of apologies based on prejudicial interpretations of history. While the pope "forgives and asks forgiveness," there is no acknowledgment on the part of these commentators of the biases, conceits and

hatreds that have often driven their commentaries on the Church. While the pope's apology asks for no reciprocity, it would do well for institutions such as the *Times* to examine objectively their own motivations in their attacks on the Church and the historical prejudices in which they are rooted.

\*(The apology) 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.

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."

\*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.

The papal apology dealt with errors and faults of Christians in their actions in the past and present. These errors were most often 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. The apology that the pope did issue, however, was for any inadvertent cooperation Christians may have given that contributed to 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.

\*Regrettably, he made no mention of discrimination against homosexuals.

The papal apology was not meant as an endorsement of a contemporary ideological agenda. The apology makes clear that "Christians have been guilty of rejection and exclusion, consenting to acts of discrimination on the basis of racial and ethnic differences." 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* implied that such teaching involves "discrimination against homosexuals." It does not. Again, the *Times* demanded 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."8 That document made clear the need for repentance among Christians for anti-Semitic attitudes that contributed in any way to the Holocaust. 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 – an insult to the memory of the Holocaust – to utilize this ultimate 20th

century evil as a tool against the Church and to thereby mitigate the evil that was pagan Nazism.

\*...(and) the failure of Pope Pius XII to speak out against the Nazi genocide.

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 other then-existing agency of any kind worldwide combined during the war. The actions of Pius XII hardly need an apology.

## Conclusion

The difficulty in such an unprecedented event by Pope John Paul II is that too often history is clouded with the prejudices and presumptions of those commenting and reporting on it. As evidenced in the *Times* editorial on the papal apology, history has often been twisted and reinterpreted for ideological purposes. 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 historical analysis – free from the prejudices of the past and present – needs to guide our understanding of the past. 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.”<sup>9</sup>

Pope John Paul II’s historic act of atonement is a witness to guide Catholics into the third millennium. Bigoted commentary, historical distortion, demands for doctrinal abandonment, and anti-Catholic prejudice will not detract from this unprecedented jubilee “request for pardon.”

#### SUMMARY POINTS

\*The Holy Father saw this “request for pardon” as the culmination of the Church’s “examination of conscience” for the Jubilee Year. The goal of such a public act of repentance is a “purification of memory.”

\*This papal act of atonement for past sin is an intensely spiritual act. It is meant to seek forgiveness from God and allow Christians to enter the new millennium better prepared to evangelize the Truth of faith.

\*Particularly when events in history are raised the admission of faults committed by the sons and daughters of the Church may look like acquiescence in the face of accusations made by those who are prejudicially hostile to the Church.

\*There have been responses to the papal apology that make demands for apologies not required in the historical or cultural context of the events of the past.

\*Many secular commentators have failed to see that at the heart of many of these errors is the fact that Christians have faltered when they have become caught up in the culture of their day.

\*These sins are the errors Christians share with all mankind and find their roots in society, history and the culture, not in the Gospels.

\*There is a direct implication in some commentary on the papal

apology 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.

\*While the pope “forgives and asks forgiveness,” there is no acknowledgment on the part of secular commentators on the biases, conceits and hatreds that have often driven their comments on the Church.

\*Critics are confusing repentance for certain wrong actions with admissions of doctrinal error. What the apology could not be, and was not intended to be, was an apology for Church doctrine.

\*The papal apology was not meant as an endorsement of a contemporary ideological agenda.

\*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 – an insult to the memory of the Holocaust – to utilize this ultimate 20th century evil as a tool against the Church and to thereby mitigate the evil that was pagan Nazism.

\*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 other existing agency of any kind worldwide combined during the war. The actions of Pius XII hardly need an apology.

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## FOOTNOTES

1*Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past* (December, 1999) International Theological Commission.

2*Incarnationis mysterium* (November, 1998) Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000

3*Memory and Reconciliation* (Introduction)

4Summarized and excerpted from Catholic News Service, *Text Forgiveness* (March 13, 2000)

5*Memory and Reconciliation* (6.3)

6Ibid.

7Summarized from Catholic News Service, “Mea culpa, tua culpa: Vatican hopes others inspired by apologies,” John Thavis (March 10, 2000).

8*Memory and Reconciliation* (5.4)