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Anton Štrukelj

The Purification of Memory

Abstract: Pope John Paul II asked several times forgiveness for the Church's guilt in the past. The public liturgical prayer in the Holy Year 2000 (March 12) was well-considered and carefully prepared, especially with the publication of a document of the International Theological Commission entitled: *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*. Pope John Paul II emphasized: »Acknowledging the weaknesses of the past is an act of honesty and courage.« It shows the vitality of the Church, which can offer to individuals and to society an example of repentance and conversion. Pope Benedict XVI puts it bluntly: »This act of the purification of memory, of self-purification, of opening oneself to the Lord's grace, which spurs us on to do good, serves also to make us credible in the eyes of the world.«

Key words: Church, confession of sins, forgiveness, purification of memory, credibility, example to the society, sanctity of the Church

Povzetek: **Očiščenje spomina**

Papež Janez Pavel II. je ob raznih priložnostih prosil za odpuščanje grehov Cerkve v preteklosti. Javna liturgična prošnja v svetem letu 2000 (12. marca) je bila dobro premišljena in skrbno pripravljena, zlasti z objavo dokumenta Mednarodne teološke komisije z naslovom *Spomin in sprava. Cerkev in napake preteklosti*. Papež Janez Pavel II. je poudaril: »Priznanje včerajšnjih napak je dejanje poštenosti in poguma.« V tem se kaže živost Cerkve, ki more posameznikom in družbi dati zgled kesanja in spreobrnjenja. Papež Benedikt XVI. pove naravnost: »To dejanje očiščenja spomina, očiščenja samega sebe in odprtosti za Gospodovo milost, ki nas spodbuja, da delamo dobro, nas tudi pred očmi sveta napavlja verodostojne.«

Ključne besede: Cerkev, priznanje grehov, odpuščanje, očiščenje spomina, verodostojnost, zgled družbi, svetost Cerkve

1. Introduction

The penitential liturgy of the recently canonized Pope John Paul II on the First Sunday of Lent (March 12) in the Holy Year 2000 at St. Peter's in Rome was an important event, one of the high points in the Jubilee Year. The pope's prophetic gesture was new and nevertheless deeply in continuity with the history of the Church. The public liturgical prayer was well-considered and carefully prepared. More than once Pope John Paul II asked forgiveness for the Church's guilt in the past. In his Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente* (1994, no. 33), he expressed the wish that the Holy Year not only should be a special occasion for individual penance, but also ought to signify for the Church a »purification of memory«, in which she should reflect on the guilt of the past that weighs upon Church history.

Pope John Paul II emphasizes: »Acknowledging the weaknesses of the past is an act of honesty and courage.« It shows the vitality of the Church, which can offer to individuals and to society an example of repentance and conversion. Pope Benedict XVI puts it bluntly: »This act of the purification of memory, of self-purification, of opening oneself to the Lord's grace, which spurs us on to do good, serves also to make us credible in the eyes of the world.« (2010, 504)

2. The Church's Request for Forgiveness

In his Bull of Indiction of the Holy Year 2000 *Incarnationis mysterium* (1998, no. 11), John Paul II highlights among the »signs /... / which may help people to live the exceptional grace of the Jubilee with greater fervour« the »purification of memory«. The »purification of memory /... / calls everyone to make an act of courage and humility in admitting the wrongs done by those who have borne or bear the name of Christian.«

Pope John Paul II said in his homily on March 12, 2000:

»Before Christ who, out of love, took our guilt upon himself, we are all invited to make a profound examination of conscience. One of the characteristic elements of the Great Jubilee is what I described as the »purification of memory« (Bull *Incarnationis mysterium*, no. 11). As the Successor of Peter, I asked 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« (ibid.). Today, the First Sunday of Lent, seemed to me the right occasion for the Church, gathered spiritually round the Successor of Peter, to implore divine forgiveness for the sins of all believers. *Let us forgive and ask forgiveness!*

This appeal has prompted (in the ecclesial community) a thorough and fruitful reflection, which led to the publication several days ago of a document of the International Theological Commission, entitled: *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*. I thank everyone who helped to prepare this text. It is very useful for correctly understanding and

carrying out the authentic request for pardon, based on the objective responsibility which Christians share as members of the Mystical Body, and which spurs today's faithful to recognize, along with their own sins, the sins of yesterday's Christians, in the light of careful historical and theological discernment. Indeed, ›because of the bond which unites us to one another in the Mystical Body, 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« (*Incarnationis mysterium*, no. 11). The recognition of past wrongs serves to reawaken our consciences to the compromises of the present, opening the way to conversion for everyone. *Let us forgive and ask forgiveness!*«

At this point we can ask ourselves with Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI:

»What is forgiveness, really? What happens when forgiveness takes place? Guilt is a reality, an objective force; it has caused destruction that must be repaired. For this reason, forgiveness must be more than a matter of ignoring, of merely trying to forget. Guilt must be worked through, healed, and thus overcome. Forgiveness exacts a price – first of all from the person who forgives. He must overcome within himself the evil done to him; he must, as it were, burn it interiorly and in so doing renew himself. As a result, he also involves the other, the trespasser, in this process of transformation, of inner justification, and both parties, suffering all the way through and overcoming evil, are made new.« (2007, 158–159)

In her request for forgiveness, the Church turns first of all to God. She praises and professes his magnificent grace and mercy.

»This request for pardon must not be understood as an expression of false humility or as a denial of her 2.000-year history, which is certainly richly deserving in the areas of charity, culture and holiness. Instead [the Church] responds to a necessary requirement of the truth, which, in addition to the positive aspects, recognizes the human limitations and weaknesses of the various generations of Christ's disciples.« (John Paul II 1999)

3. »Spotted by sins, yet Beautiful«

Then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, perceived the idea proposed by the pope as an important challenge to theology. The new elements of the pope's idea and of the penitential liturgy of the Church that he had planned confronted theologians with the task of reflecting on the theological significance of such a process. The International Theological Commission, under its president, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, received directions to prepare the way for this act of requesting pardon with a scholarly study and to explain its deeper meaning. The document *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past* was presented by the Cardinal Prefect Joseph Ratzinger on March 7, 2000, in the Press Office of the Holy See. (2005) Cardinal

Georges Cottier, OP, as Secretary of the Theological Commission, explained the text in greater detail (2000).

As the Dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* puts it: »The Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament – a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men.« (1964, no. 1) Hans Urs von Balthasar says: »All Christians are sinners, and if the Church does not sin as Church, she does sin in all her members, and through the mouths of all her members she must confess her guilt.« (1991, 245) The Church is holy because she is the salvific instrument of the Holy Spirit. For this reason she is indestructible in professing God's saving deeds, in her faith, in her teaching, and in the sacraments that Christ instituted in her. Neither interior decay nor hostility from the outside will ever overcome her (Mt 16:18).

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger analyzes the »phenomenon of animosity toward the Church«. Protestantism tried to show that

»the Catholic Church was not merely stained with sin, as she had always known and said, but that she was, allegedly, completely corrupted and ruined and no longer the Church of Christ; rather, she has, on the contrary, become an instrument of the Antichrist. The position became still worse in the course of the Enlightenment; let us recall Voltaire's *Écrasez l'Infâme!* Ultimately, the accusations were growing in scope right up to those of Nietzsche, in which the Church appears, no longer as merely failing to do the will of Christ, but as the great evil of all evils afflicting mankind, as effecting the alienation of man from himself, something from which he must finally be liberated in order to become once more himself. We see the same theme, differently worked out, in Marxism. /... / Since the Enlightenment, many deplorable historical realities have been exaggerated into real myths – the Crusades, the Inquisition, the burning of witches – and these have grown far beyond the historical facts into mythical bugbears that not merely justify but positively demand the rejection of the Church.« (2005, 280–281)

In this often unfriendly situation the Church admits with great candor her own weakness, asks for forgiveness, and shows the way to reconciliation. This is actually her prophetic charism. The Catholic Church, by her own example, presents to civil society also the way out of many even more profound crises. The request for pardon is an important sign for the New Evangelization, which is always reconciliation with God and among human beings.

Pope Benedict XVI explains the liturgical prayer, the *Confiteor*, which introduces the celebration of the liturgy every day.

»The priest, the pope, the laymen all confess with their ›I‹ – each one of them and all together before God and in the presence of their brothers and sisters – that they have sinned, with their own sin, their own most grievous sin. Two aspects of this opening of the holy liturgy seem important to me. On one hand, we speak in the first person singular: ›I‹ have sinned; I am not confessing the sins of other people; I am not confessing the anonymous sins

of a collective entity; I am myself confessing with my ›I‹. Yet at the same time it is all the people at prayer who with their ›I‹ are saying, ›I have sinned‹. /... / Thus in this fellowship of confession is expressed that image of the Church which was formulated by the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen gentium*, chapter 1, number 8: *Ecclesia /... / sancta simul et semper purificanda, poenitentiam et renovationem continuo prosequitur*: the Church is at the same time holy and constantly in need of purification; she is always treading the path of penitence and of renewal. This picture of the Church, formulated by Vatican II and put into practice daily in the liturgy, for its own part reflects the Gospel parables of the darnel [weeds] growing amid the corn [wheat] and of the fishing net that catches all kinds of fish, good and bad. In all generations the Church has recognized these parables as being the Lord's way of expressing in anticipation her own experiences. /... / The Church of Jesus Christ cannot separate herself from sinners; she has to accept that there are all kinds of fish in her net and that in her field the darnel is always growing along with the corn.« (276–277)

4. **Confessio fidei – Confessio peccati – Confessio laudis**

Alongside this self-critical attitude of the Church, which again and again admits her own *Mea culpa*, we must still declare that the Catholic Church – despite the sins which are undeniable and more than obvious – nevertheless remains Holy Church. With the request for pardon and with the document of the Theological Commission, the Church of today is not condemning the Church of the past. Rather she is admitting the roots of her own failings in the past. The Church is very much aware of the fact that there is sin in her; she has always fought against the notion of a Church in which there is room for saints only.

»Admitting sin is an act of honesty by which we can make it clear to people that the Lord is stronger than our sins. An anecdote comes to mind that is related by Cardinal Consalvi, the Secretary of State of Pius VII. When someone told him, ›Napoleon wants to destroy the Church‹, he replied: ›He will not succeed; that is something that not even we have managed to do.« (Ratzinger 2010, 504)

Joseph Ratzinger (2005) lists the three criteria for understanding correctly the reality of the request for pardon. First: the Church of the present cannot present itself as a tribunal that passes judgment on past generations. Second: admitting, according to Augustine, means »doing the truth«.¹ Third:

»Again in accordance with Augustine, we have to say that a Christian *confessio peccati* [confession of sins] always has to go hand in hand with a

¹ On this topic: Ratzinger 1957.

confessio laudis [confession of praise]. In any honest examination of conscience we can see that for our part in every generation we have done much that is evil. Yet we can also see that, in spite of our sins, God has always purified and renewed the Church and has always entrusted great things to fragile vessels. And who could fail to recognize how much good has been done, for example, in the past two centuries by new religious congregations and by lay movements in the sphere of education, in the social sector, in efforts on behalf of the weak, the sick, the poor, and the suffering, even while those centuries were at the same time ravaged by the atrocities of the atheistic systems? It would be failing in honesty to see only our evil and not the good that God has effected through the faithful – in spite of their sins. The Church Fathers saw this paradox of guilt and grace as being summed up in the words of the Bride in the Song of Songs: *Nigra sum sed formosa* (Sg 1:5). »I am stained with sins, yet beautiful – beautiful through your grace and through what you have done. The Church is able to confess the sins of the past and of the present in all openness and confidence, in the knowledge that evil will never completely stain her; in the knowledge that the Lord is stronger than our sins and renews his Church again and again, that she may continue to be the instrument of God's good works in our world.« (282–283)

The memory of the scandals of the past cannot hinder the witness of the Church of today. Conversely, however, acknowledgment of the failings of the Church's sons and daughters in the past can foster renewal and reconciliation in the present. This is why the whole Church, with the confession of the sins of her members, confesses also her faith in God and his infinite goodness and willingness to forgive. This conviction prompted the Church Fathers, for example Saint Ambrose, to make lapidary statements. »Let us, then, be on our guard, lest our fall be the Church's wound (*Caveamus igitur, ne lapsus noster vulnus Ecclesiae fiat*).« (Balthasar 1991, 246)

The Church's request for pardon is a healing and prophetic act. Saint Augustine says:

»The saints themselves are not free of daily sins. The Church as a whole says, »Forgive us our trespasses!« She thus possesses spots and wrinkles. But through confession the wrinkles are smoothed out, the spots washed away. The Church stands in prayer in order, through confession, to be purified, and as long as men live on earth, that is how she stands.« (284)

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