Comment: *Asking pardon*

When you start asking pardon for the sins of your forefathers, without being very clear about who is to accept your apologies, it becomes difficult to know when to stop. The Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews published *We Remember: a reflection on the Shoah* (see *Briefing* April 1998), the first statement issued by the Catholic Church about the Holocaust and the part played by Christians. Asking Jews world wide to 'hear us with open hearts', the document speaks of this 'unspeakable tragedy', admitting the part played by the long tradition of Christian anti-Semitism in preparing the way, allowing that, while many Christians helped Jews during World War II, many others who knew about what was happening failed to protest, and calling for an act of repentance for the failures of the Church over the centuries and particularly with regard to the 'heavy burden of conscience' we should bear after the *Shoah*.

Media coverage demonstrated that many Jews regarded this statement as less than satisfactory. It is doubtful whether many people, Jews or Catholics, remember *We Remember* at all, or even noticed it at the time. Short of denouncing Pope Pius XII for not speaking out against the genocide it is hard to see what the Vatican could do to satisfy some people.

Pope Pius XII was not the only leader who might have been more eloquent in opposing Nazi Germany's genocidal policies. In *The British Government and the Holocaust* (Sussex Academic Press, 1999), a thoroughly researched and well received work of scholarship, Meier Sompolinsky shows that the chances of influencing the War Cabinet to do something directly about the genocide were greatly reduced by the personal antagonisms between the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the British Section of the World Jewish Congress which prevented a forceful collective appeal—not that it was clear what the Allies might have done, other than bomb Auschwitz-Birkenau. For that matter, what else Pius XII might have done remains open to argument—opened churches, at least in Rome, as sanctuaries perhaps? Or joined one of the camp-bound trains?

Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past, the statement issued by the International Theological Commission in March, opened the way for the unprecedented request for pardon for the sins of Christians over the centuries that took place in the basilica of St Peter's on the first Sunday of Lent. The confession of sins made by the Pope in the name of the Church was addressed to God, who alone can

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forgive sins; but it was made in the sight of the world from which the guilt of members of the Church cannot be hidden. The confession of sins committed in the service of the truth was made by Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (a stray dove flew round the basilica, they say); followed by five more cardinals, confessing sins respectively against Christian unity, the people of Israel, people of other religions and cultures, women, and victims of various kinds of abuse.

In the congregation of 8000 there were 200 bishops as well as 30 cardinals; it is difficult to imagine how much more solemnly and representatively the Church could ask pardon for the sins of the past.

The ceremony only made sense in virtue of a certain conception of the Church and, equally, a certain understanding of sin. As regards responsibility for sin, the ITC statement contends, the sinner's subjective culpability ceases with his death—it is not passed on to his descendants; yet 'the evil done often outlives the one who did it through the consequences of behaviour that can become a heavy burden on the consciences and memories of the descendants'. We should not rush to judgment—we need 'moral certainty' that 'what was done in contradiction to the Gospel in the name of the Church' by some of her leaders 'could have been understood by them as such and avoided'. We need 'correct historical judgment'—not always easy to obtain. (Burning at the stake would seem very different to you if you believed in the eternal fire of hell.) As regards the understanding of the Church, the ITC document speaks of the 'objective responsibility' that all Christians share as 'members of the Mystical Body'—the doctrine so memorably enunciated by Pope Pius XII in the encyclical 'Mystici Corporis Christi' (1943)—the doctrine which enables the Successor of Peter to speak for the Church—in this case to ask pardon for wrongs done by Christians in past centuries.

Nothing in this history of asking forgiveness was more memorable than the television pictures of Pope John Paul II at the Western Wall in Jerusalem on Sunday, 26 March. If that was not an act of repentance to change history it is difficult to imagine what would be. Many questions remain. It was not only media coverage that allowed us to see the Pope speaking in the name of *all* Christians: should he have done so, and what are the implications? If so many things done in the name of the Church have been wrong, must it not have been because some of the Church's leaders held and taught ideas that are wrong? Where do you stop when you start asking pardon for the errors of the past?

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