Comment:

Apologies

These days, apologies are in order. Descendants of the native peoples have received apologies from the government of the United States of America, and Aboriginals from the government of Australia, for the treatment of their ancestors, the theft of their lands and the desecration of their religious shrines by generations of immigrants. Swiss banks have been shamed into admitting that they may hold funds that should have been returned, decades ago, to surviving members of Jewish families who deposited them. After the Holocaust, many people think, the Churches should beg pardon for the centuries of antisemitism in Christianity that prepared the way.

Who is to beg pardon, and from whom, and who is in a position to grant forgiveness, are not always questions easy to answer. The appalling history of child abuse that has surfaced incriminates members of staff in orphanages and schools with no church connections: culpably negligent supervision is sometimes traceable, individuals have been brought to court, and victims have obtained redress. Begging pardon and accepting apologies are seldom possible: local-authority homes have often been closed, perpetrators of abuse may be dead, the most that can be done may be to pay victims compensation out of public funds, without any institution having to admit blame for what happened even in the quite recent past.

It is different with the cruelty and corruption in institutions with church connections, particularly with dioceses and religious orders in the Catholic Church. The evidence of brutality, by nuns and priests and teaching brothers, particularly in English-speaking countries, and dating from as recently as thirty years ago, is appalling. Even if this only shows how easy it is for Catholic institutions to replicate the perversities of the world around them, it remains shameful. Compared with many of the other schools and orphanages that have been accused of permitting cruelty to children, the Catholic institutions usually still exist. Dioceses and religious orders have been required to pay compensation to people who were violated many years ago by pastors and teachers now often dead. But the present representatives of such dioceses and religious orders have also offered public apologies for the misconduct of their predecessors. As the evidence was uncovered, what the media often greeted as attempts at a 'cover up', were the flounderings of bewildered

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men and women who, once the extent of the scandal emerged, have been quick to accept responsibility — and to ask pardon.

The Lord is a God merciful and gracious, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, we read (e.g. Exodus 34: 6-7) — 'yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation'. Albeit incomprehensibly to many people these days, the present generation in these Catholic institutions feel the necessity of accepting their predecessors' guilt.

Questions remain. Accepting responsibility for one's predecessors' misdeeds involves a very specific understanding of the solidarity between one generation and the next. Secondly, the background to the crime is not always transparent: Christians, and the Catholic Church in particular, are inclined to accept responsibility for the antisemitism that culminated in the Holocaust; but Hitler's plans, and the treatment of millions of people in occupied Poland and the Soviet Union, show that the Jews were only one category among the *Untermenschen* who were to be exterminated. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed, most of them Orthodox and Catholic Christians, not to forget gypsies and homosexuals, in the name of racist-biological theories, quite irrespective of religious affiliations. And again, as Pope John Paul II notes, in the apostolic letter *Tertio Millenio Adveniente* (10 November 1994), we need to remember the 'cultural conditioning', which explains why certain things were done which seem to us now inexcusable and shameful but which few questioned at the time.

The Vatican has just held a three-day conference for scholars to examine the history of the Inquisition, as part of the preparation, no doubt, for the Pope to acknowledge that 'painful chapter', that is to say: 'the acquiescence given, especially in certain centuries, to *intolerance and even the use of violence* in the service of truth' (paragraph 35). That 'mitigating factors' need to be considered, the Pope says, 'does not exonerate the Church from the obligation to express profound regret for the weaknesses of so many of her sons and daughters who sullied her face'. ('*Daughters*': how many women were employed by the Inquisition?) The lesson to be drawn from this repentance on the part of the Catholic Church, for centuries of 'violence in the service of truth', should lead '*all* Christians [my italics] to adhere fully to the sublime principle stated by the [Second Vatican] Council: "The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it wins over the mind with gentleness and power [*suaviter simul ac fortiter*]"'.

You can say that again.

F.K.

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