Excuse Instead of Confession of Guilt?

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By Gerhard Bodendorfer

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In the first issue of *BiLi* 1998 I have concerned myself extensively with documents about Christian guilt in the Holocaust. This was caused by the awaited Vatican document*) which was published on March 16, after ten years of preparation Many expectations and hopes had been linked to this document. In pre-stating my evaluation of it I have to say that, unfortunately, it lags far behind the expectations and has not brought about the clarifications and process of cleansing hoped for. Here I would like to formulate my impression, briefly and to the point, without being able to work through all the areas of concern.

The Document

1. The Foreword of the Pope

The best part of this document might be the foreword of Pope John Paul II. He is deeply concerned, as no other pope before him, about the dialogue of Jews and Christians, and he demanded again and again that antisemitism and the anti-Judaic passages in the New Testament should be confronted.

In his introductory letter he expresses his hope that the document of the Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism "would help to heal the wounds of past misunderstandings and injustices", that it would cause remembrance, which would make a recurrence of the Shoah impossible. He prays to the God of history to lead all people of good will to work together, so that the world will be marked by honest respect for the life and dignity of the human being created in the image of God.

2. The Keyword "Remembrance"

Unfortunately, the document does not live up to these ambitious expectations. Admittedly, it has aimed rather high. The keyword "remember" in the title thus wants to do justice to one of the main thoughts in Jewish faith and experience. Judaism has made remembrance -- as recreation of the past, of blessed as well as evil times -- the focal point of its life, as no other people or religion did. Even the Shoah is to be included. It is remembered, recreated in solemn ceremony and memorial. Remembrance is the internalization of a past event in the hearts and thoughts of those who live the

present. The resulting memory creates identity in the common faith of the people throughout the centuries. The Pesach haggada engages the Jew in remembrance of the Exodus not as a past event, but as one that happens here and now. Indeed, remembrance becomes the recreated experience of the past that determines and gives life to the present. The participation in the ritual enables every generation anew to incorporate itself into the history of the people. The Jewish people becomes a We and an Us in its remembrance of the Exodus and a community standing at the threshold of liberation.

After Auschwitz this experience of a liberating reality has become very difficult. That is why post-Shoah theology made the Shoah very much part of remembrance and memory. It recognized the need to internalize it and to include it even in the modern Pesach haggadot. Arthur Cohen suggested that at Pesach, when the Exodus is remembered, every Jew should consider him/herself as being in the death camps, in the experience of the Shoah, in order to recreate the past in present. And Irving Greenberg adds a fifth child to the four in the night of Pesach: a child that has not survived, and cannot ask the question. The remembrance that this child awakens is the preservation of the divine image of the Jews who fought for their lives, the remembering of the ghettos and camps and of the Seder night in the Warsaw ghetto, when it rose in revolt. This remembering happens silently, because words fail to describe the experience. When history is recreated and internalized in this way, it becomes the bearing ground and driving force of a common existence. Only when it is possible to lay such a ground in people, will a celebration or festivity over time be able to create identity.

Much more difficult is remembrance for perpetrators. An exhibition of the German Wehrmacht proved that we have a hard time remembering our history in an unadorned and confrontational way. Austria and Switzerland -- the latter even later -- have only recently learned to redefine their role during the Nazi period, and have distanced themselves from a perceived role as victims.

The church faces a special dilemma. It has not only to uncover a long history of anti-Judaism, but also the theological background of its enmity against Jews. Such a critical reflection would need to lead to a research into its causes, which not only describes facts but questions the theological (mis-) judgements that brought them about. There is, for example, the accusation of deicide, the murder of Christ, which persisted in the church right to the Second Vatican Council, and which is partly to blame for the spiritual rejection of Judaism. The accusation led to pogroms and murders of Jews.

3. Owning up to anti-Judaism

The anti-Jewish prejudice is, of course, not disputed in the new document. There is even a question raised, if the persecution of Jews through the Nazis was not made easier because of the anti-Jewish prejudices in Christian minds and hearts. However, already the question, if the anti-Jewish sentiment made Christians less "sensitive or even indifferent towards the persecution of the Jews through National Socialism", is formulated so cautiously and strangely, that the good starting point contained in it can never be pursued any further. The concept "sensitive" in a document about the Shoah and in context of the church"s anti-Judaism strikes one as curious. It appears too harmless to describe what Christian anti-Judaism started. Overall, Christian anti-Judaism is indeed pointed out in the document -- and that has to be welcomed -- but it remains intangible and totally underexposed in its dimension.

It would have been necessary to draw attention in the document to the fact that a range of Nazi decrees, from prohibitions against practicing certain crafts and professions to the marking of Jews with a yellow badge, already had their model in antique and medieval Christian laws. This has been pointed out, even by comparing historic images, in a number of publications (compare Hilberg, Raul. *The Destruction of the European Jews*. New York: Quadrangle Books, 1961). Heinz Schreckenberg"s three-volume collection of anti-Jewish texts of the Church Fathers reveals the

dimensions of the antisemitism of the church in such a drastic manner that one is not surprised that Hitler once declared, he just acted out the 1,500 year-old Christian enmity against Jews. "For 1,500 years the Catholic Church has considered the Jews to be parasites, locked them up in ghettos etc., there one got to know who the Jews really are" (a quotation from the files of the German bishops about the situation of the church, 1933-1945 I, Mainz 1968, 101f.). Hitler"s words are sadly true to a large extent.

Why then is it so hard for the church to acknowledge that its attitude towards Judaism shares the responsibility for what is deeply regretted in the document? There was, after all, no lack of powerful language which had the destruction of Judaism in mind. The Church Father Chrysostom wrote, "Such animals that are no longer fit for work, are fit to be slaughtered. That has happened to the Jews. They made themselves unfit for work and have therefore become fit for slaughter" (*Adversus Judaeos*, I,2 PG 48,846). Many pogroms are proof not only of Jew-hatred but also of the readiness to murder in order to remove Judaism from Christian Europe. And it can not be denied that even church leaders ordered the ghettoization and restrictions of the rights of the Jews. One cannot pretend that it was the rule rather than the exception, when some popes sided with the Jews or stood against the blood libels and offered their protection. It was rather the other way around and should be seen as the honourable and rightfully undeniable positive side of Catholicism. However, there is no reason to overemphasize it.

4. The differentiation between anti-Judaism and "new-pagan" antisemitism

The document puts great value on the difference between the anti-Judaism of the churches and the racist Nazi antisemitism based on "new-pagan" roots. This difference should not be denied. However, it should also be pointed out that already before and during the time of the sprouting National Socialism the boundaries between anti-Judaism and antisemitism became blurred even in church circles, and clearly racist and biologically-based references were made. The doctrine of the Purity of Blood (*limpieza de sangre*) had already come up in Spain among Christians from the 15th century on. A Fray Francisco de Torrejoncillo then "proved" in 1673 that even an eighth of Jewish blood in a person was enough to consider that person "an enemy of Christians, of Christ and of the divine law", and that there were cases where Judaism was secretly practiced into the 21st degree of blood relationship (see Y.Ch. Yerushalmi, Assimilierung und rassischer Antisemitismus. Die iberischen und die deutschen Modelle, in: ders., *Ein Feld in Anatot*, Berlin 1993, 62),

In my hometown, the Salzburg Assistant Landeshauptmann and Catholic Dechant Neureiter said in a meeting on December 23, 1922, "Only racial antisemitism is correct. Everything else is not tenable, and even if the person is baptized, he/she still belongs to that race." This example shows how the boundaries between Catholic anti-Judaism and the "new-pagan" antisemitism become blurred. But nothing of this is mentioned in the Vatican document, quite to the contrary. Again, a clear line is drawn and it is thereby suggested that the church had nothing to do with the teachings of National Socialism and had even strongly condemned them. Yet, the Catholic dogmatic theologian Michael Schmaus said already in his *Begegnungen zwischen katholischem Christentum und nationalsozialistischer Weltanschauung* (Münster 1934) (Encounters between Catholic Christianity and National-Socialist Worldview): The Tablets of the National Socialist Ought (Sollen) and of the Catholic Imperatives point in the same direction." And Hermann Greive, the great researcher of antisemitism, says it clearly: The "growing reception of racist-national categories (as unity of blood or origin and worldview [Abstammungs- oder Weltanschauungseinheit]) and its integration into the religious-theological way of thinking" was obvious (*Theologie und Ideologie. Katholizismus und Judentum in Deutschland und*

Österreich 1918-1935, Heidelberg 1969, 127). However, acknowledged scientific contributions, documented historical utterances and repeated reports by witnesses of the time are obviously not sufficient to cause the Vatican to issue a more critical statement.

5. Pius XII

In this context it is rather painful reading, when the controversial person of Pius XII again is defended in a one-sided way and relieved of any share in the guilt of the Shoah. Even though one should beware of a generalizing condemnation of this pope, it is unacceptable to shield him from criticism. When he was still the Papal Nuntius in Munich he had asked the Centre Party (Zentrumspartei) to support the Nazis, because they wanted a Concordat for the Reich. It was because of his pressure that the Christian-Socialist Party voted for the Law of Empowerment (Ermächtigungsgesetz), which enabled Hitler to wield total power. Only towards the end of WW II Pius XII struggled through to actually help Jewish citizens and to contribute to their survival. Is this to be considered a late listening to reason? If this pope was so sensitive and heroic, as many want us to believe, how could he appoint Archbishop Stepinac as military vicar of the fascist Ustascha and even, in 1946, instead of regretting the atrocities of this murderous Croatian institution, promote Stepinac to cardinal? At the time even German troops had criticized Ustascha for its brutality in the murder of about 300,000 people. Instead of a beatification the Catholic Church should open all its files and archives, in order to allow some light into this time and around the person of this pope, without nervousness and pre-judgements.

Similarly bitter is the defence of Cardinal Faulhaber in the Vatican document. Especially his Advent sermons in Munich testify to his clearly anti-Jewish attitude at the time. His defence of the Old Testament against Judaism was directed against the so-called "German Christians", but it is no less antisemitic. His confessed approval of the German state is apparent in the following words: "In a time, when the heads of the world"s empires stand opposite Germany in cool distance and more or less full of distrust, the Catholic Church, the highest moral power on earth, with its Concordat assured the new German government of her trust. For the respectability of the new government in foreign countries this act was of invaluable consequence" (Cardinal Faulhaber on February 14, 1937. Quotation in G. Levy, *Die katholische Kirche und das Dritte Reich*, Munich 1965, 108). Here Cardinal Faulhaber emphasizes the church"s recognition of Hitler"s Germany, and he confesses what -- hopefully not in evil intention -- the present document conceals, namely that there were more than just attempts towards an "unholy" alliance between the church and National Socialism, based on the struggle against "Bolshevism", "Jews and Freemasons". "On June 25, 45,000 Catholics of the diocese of Berlin gathered in the Grunewald Stadium. Also the Papal Nuntius was present at this mass-gathering. Perhaps it was the first time that he was led to the altar by SA-men with Swastika flags under the tolling of bells and the sound of fanfares. Hitler was invited, but had declined with regret" (Levy, 119). This was the mood in Germany. Can we as Catholics really close our eyes to this? Do we not have to critically look at the church"s attitude toward National Socialism and admit that there was a broad sympathy for National Socialism in Catholic circles? There was, on the other hand, a Catholic influence on National Socialist functionaries as well, as can be seen in the following remarks: "We reject mission to the Jews in Germany as long as Jews have the rights of citizenship and Jews like Max Reinhardt and Moissi are doing theatre. And here we National Socialists say, Jesus Christ should come once again and drive these sordid shopkeepers out of the Temple with a whip! Here the strong arm of government would be needed" (from a speech by the National Socialist member of parliament, Wagner, at the 10th session of the Provincial Parliament (Landtag) in Salzburg, March 10, 1933).

6. Expectations and further steps

The document states that John Paul II regrets that the spiritual resistance and the concrete actions of many Christians did not live up to what one would expect of followers of Christ. A close observation of history actually reveals the opposite: *because* Christian teaching, preaching, attitude and action were so anti-Judaic in the past, a wide range of the Christian population accepted

National Socialism. And it is *because* of this fact that a church, which wants to remember and turn around, must be expected to speak an unambiguous word of repentance, admit its guilt, and make a commitment to turn around not only in words.

The Coordinating Committee for Christian-Jewish Cooperation had prepared a text proposal, which was forwarded for consideration in the preparation of the Vatican document. Unfortunately, it found only minimal acceptance in the document and its first part, which I am quoting here, is still missing:

"The Catholic Church confesses to have become guilty because of theologically-based enmity against Jews. She takes responsibility for the suffering the Jews had to endure throughout centuries. The Catholic Church thereby also shares responsibility for the genocide of the Shoah. To shoulder this responsibility means to

- admit the guilt;
- analyse the causes truthfully and free of prejudices;
- question exegetical and dogmatic teachings and to make aware of interpretations that are contemptuous of and hostile towards Jews in research, preaching and liturgy;
- search for a new identity in theological research, doctrine and practice, which understands itself as rooted in Judaism and which takes seriously and acknowledges present-day Judaism as indispensable partner.

Any request to grant forgiveness or even reconciliation has to be preceded by an admittance of guilt and a repentant turning."

The presented document has, and rightfully so, left many Jews and Christians less than satisfied. Kardinal Cassidy, the chair of the Commission, understands it as a statement of repentance. In my view it does not go far enough to be acceptable as such. However, I support that he wants it to initiate a reflection in individual parishes. For this reason the document is not to be taken as final, but it leaves room for those working in the interreligious dialogue. I understand this as encouragement to take this document only as a first attempt, which has turned out rather weak, in spite of having been in preparation for ten years, and to use it as a basis for a continuing genuine, new and open dialogue, that does not shy away from an unsparing recognition of guilt.

This document then is not the end of the debate, but only its beginning.

* We remember: A Reflection On the Shoah Vatican City, March 16, 1998

Translation from the German: Fritz Voll