
The growing rift between the Eastern and the Western Churches engendered great bitterness when it hardened into a permanent schism, with mutual excommunications, in 1054. Equal bitterness accompanied the further sundering of the western Church by the Protestant Reformation, and the splintering of the Reformers themselves into further subdivisions. Persecutions and religious wars resulted from the imposition of a religion by the government of a state upon the population ("cujus regio illius religio").

In almost all human conflicts both sides share, to a greater or lesser degree, the responsibility for the conflict. Consequently no reconciliation is possible unless two steps are taken: first, an awareness by each side of their share in the guilt; second, a willingness to forgive and ask for forgiveness.
The steps taken in this direction are recounted in the book under review. Originally published in Milan in Italian, it has been translated by an American Dominican based in Washington. The first Part of the book outlines the steps taken in and outside the Catholic Church prior to the pontificate of John Paul II. The second part contains some 90 statements or gestures by this Pope dealing with an awareness of past injustice and a desire to rectify them.

The First Steps

The first steps were taken by the Anglicans. In the Lambeth Conference of 1920 the bishops of the Anglican Communion issued a confession: “We acknowledge the condition of broken fellowship to be contrary to God’s will, and we desire frankly to confess our share in the guilt of crippling the Body of Christ and hindering the activity of the spirit.”

A similar and even broader statement was made by a larger group, the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam in 1927.

Shortly after World War II, the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Lausanne in 1948 (with the participation of the Eastern Orthodox Church) made a confession of guilt, not only for the disunion among Christians but also for the terrible War: “We come from Christian Churches which for a long time have been mutually misunderstood, ignored and misrepresented; we come from countries that have been at war with each other; we are all sinners and heirs of the sins of our fathers. We have not corresponded with the blessings that God has bestowed on us.”

The Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Evanston 1954) went one step further: not only an acknowledgment of guilt but also an expression or repentance. “All of
us should be united, at least in looking with repentance at our division.” Then it made the significant addition: “True repentance means to acknowledge before God that we have sinned...”

These initial steps gave rise to the hope that the divisions within Christianity might eventually be healed.

**John XXIII**

On the Catholic side it was Pope John XXIII who made the first move. He ordered a change in the prayers referring to Jews and Muslims. The petitions on Good Friday included one for the conversion of the Jewish people, who were referred to as “the unbelieving Jews” (i.e. not believing in Jesus Christ). In medieval Latin the phrase was “perfidi Judaei.” But the word “perfidious” has acquired in modern times a pejorative connotation. John XXIII ordered the offending adjective suppressed. Today, after the liturgical reforms authorized by Vatican II, that prayer is introduced in a manner honorable to the Jews: “Let us pray for the Jewish people, the first to hear the word of God...”

The Act of Consecration read on the feast of Christ the King contained the petition, “Be thou king of those who are still in the darkness of idolatry and Islam.” John XXIII ordered the word “darkness” suppressed. He was particularly friendly to Muslims as a result of his long stay in Bulgaria and Turkey.

But John XXIII’s most radical reform was his convoking of the Second Vatican Council which he hoped would “open windows” and bring “modernization” (aggiornamento) to the Church. To that Council he invited observers from the Protestant and Orthodox Churches, referred to not as heretics or schismatics but as Separated Brethren. They were treated with special honor and attention during the Council sessions.
Paul VI

Paul VI carried those initial steps of John XXIII to dramatic lengths. He visited Jerusalem, Constantinople and Geneva, the capitals of the Orthodox Churches and of the Calvinist Protestants. At Jerusalem he embraced the Orthodox Patriarch Athenagoras. This was followed by the formal lifting of the mutual excommunications that had been hurled in 1054. Ten years later, that formal lifting was commemorated at a solemn ceremony in St. Peter’s, to which the Orthodox Churches sent a delegate, the Patriarch Melitone. In an unexpected move, Pope Paul VI arose during the ceremony and knelt down to kiss the foot of the visiting Orthodox bishop.

At the opening of the Second Session of Vatican II, Paul VI addressed the Protestant and Orthodox observers:

We speak now to the representatives of the Christian denominations separated from the Catholic Church... If we are in any way to blame for the separation, we humbly beg God’s forgiveness, and beg pardon too of our brethren who feel themselves to have been injured by us...

To the Roman Curia Paul VI gave the admonition: “We should accept the criticism that surrounds us with humility, with reflection, and even with gratitude. Rome does not need to defend itself by being deaf to the suggestions that come to us from honest voices. . .”

John XXIII’s and Paul VI’s gestures of cordiality were much appreciated by Muslim leaders. By the time of Paul VI’s death, almost all Muslim states had ambassadors at the Vatican; and Papal nuncios or representatives were in the Muslim capitals. The cordiality was exemplified by Paul VI’s visit to the Kingdom of Jordan. As the Pope’s plane came near, King Hussein
in person, piloting his own plane, flew up to meet the Pope’s aircraft and escort it to the landing place.

Paul VI made a dramatic gesture, which was to change the Papal style in a significant way. During a solemn ceremony at St. Peter’s, Paul VI amazed everyone by suddenly removing the Papal tiara from his head, saying to an attendant, “Sell this and give the money to the poor.” The tiara was made of solid gold, a gift to the Pope for his coronation from the people of Milan where he had been Archbishop. But apart from its material value, the fact that it had been worn by a Pope added considerably to its worth. (It was bought by Cardinal Spellman who donated it to the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington DC.)

That gesture of Paul VI was to have the effect of abolishing forever the outmoded medieval custom of wearing the triple crown. When his successor, John Paul I began his pontificate, he was not crowned, but simply installed by the imposition of the woolen stole (the pallium) that signified his office as an archbishop.

Vatican II

Following the lead of Pope Paul VI, the Second Vatican Council included in some of its decrees an acknowledgment of past errors and injustices and a plea for forgiveness. Notable among these statements is one in the Decree on Ecumenism:

St. John has testified, ‘If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his word is not in us’ (1 John 1.10). This holds good for sins against unity. Thus, in humble prayer we beg pardon of God and of our separated brethren, just as we forgive them that offend us.
John Paul I

John Paul I reigned for only a month. But it seems that during that brief period he already had plans to address certain issues in Church history in which injustice may have been committed. The book under review cites testimony to this effect. Among the issues: Division among the churches; the status of women; the Jews; the Blacks; the “Indians” of the American continents; the Inquisition; the martyrs of the East; the history of the Papacy; the titles of the Pope; the rehabilitation of certain individuals, among them, Antonio Rosmini, Lorenzo Milani, Primo Mazzolari, and Cardinal Andrea Ferrari. This last-mentioned Cardinal Ferrari had been suspected of modernism by Pope Pius X. He was subsequently beatified by John Paul II.

John Paul II

Those same issues in John Paul I’s agenda were later addressed (in some cases with elaborate explicitness) by John Paul II. But he enlarged the list considerably. Among other matters included were the Crusades, the Galileo case, the Protestant Reformers (in particular Luther, Calvin and Zwingli), the Mafia, Racism, the case of Rwanda, Integralism, Islam, etc.

Perhaps the most revolutionary among these moves by the Pope was his reversal of traditional Catholic attitudes towards Luther. The book under review quotes the Pope’s “most mature” pronouncement on this subject delivered in Paderborn in 1996: “Today, 450 years after his death, the time that has passed permits us better to understand the person and the work of the German reformer and to do justice to him.”

Also, deeply significant is the willingness now shown by Church leaders to acknowledge the injustices committed in the name of Religion by the Inquisition.

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Emphasis is laid in this book on the Pope's exhortation to all Christians to make an examination of conscience at the end of this millenium, in order to begin the next, free from the burden of having to defend the "image" of the Church.

Reviewed by M. A. Bernad S.J.