

# A CALL TO RECONCILIATION: A WORKING-PAPER

by the ST. JACQUES COMMUNITY

*A Propos the Declaration of Cardinal Etchegaray to the Synod of Bishops:* The declaration of Roger Cardinal Etchegaray of Marseilles to the synod of bishops in Rome on October 4, 1983, profoundly moved Jewish communities throughout the world, as well as Christian bodies involved in the encounter with the Jewish people. What is less widely known is that this declaration was the fruit of a slow process of maturation. Several Catholic committees and study groups had submitted to the bishops their own proposed texts for a request for pardon and reconciliation of the Church with the Jewish people. Cardinal Etchegaray thus became within the Church the ambassador and the spokesman for this Christian thought. One of these texts, the impact of which may be seen in the cardinal's declaration, is the work of the members of the Saint Jacques group, the Hebrew-language Catholic community in Israel. We are pleased to be able to publish here this document, together with the report of the seminar which prepared it.

## **I. A Call to the Bishops of the 1983 Synod of Reconciliation for a Request for Forgiveness to the Jewish People**

"If your brother has anything against you, leave your offering, and go first and be reconciled with your brother." (Matt. 5:24)

At the root of the effort of reconciliation of all men is the asking of forgiveness which purifies the heart of the contrite. This was understood by Pope Paul VI, who asked forgiveness of our Orthodox and Protestant brothers during Vatican Council II for faults that could be imputed to Catholics in the causes of separation. The older brother, the Jewish people, whom the Christian world has wounded so deeply during the centuries, still waits for a similar gesture.

Mgr. Elchinger, Bishop of Strasbourg, stated at the Council on September 29, 1964:

We cannot deny that not only during this century but also during past centuries crimes have been committed against the Jews by the Sons of the Church... We cannot ignore that during the course of history, there have been persecutions and outrages against the Jews; there have been violations of conscience as well as forced conversions. Lastly, we cannot deny that, up until recently, errors have insinuated themselves, too frequently, into preaching, into certain catechetical books — and that in opposition to the spirit of the New Testament. In going back to the sources of the Gospel, why not draw sufficient greatness of soul to ask forgiveness in the name of numerous Christians for so many misdeeds and injustices?

Such an undertaking is the dearest wish of we Hebrew-speaking Catholics of the community of “Saint Jacques” living in Israel among our Jewish brothers. We feel the urgency of this gesture of humility, of truth, and of love, and we confide this request to our Fathers the Bishops meeting in Rome to listen to the voice of the Spirit.

## **II. Elements for Reflection**

### **Ask forgiveness — for what?**

Allow us to mention here some facts ignored by the majority of Christians, but which the Jewish people has not forgotten because unfortunately their history is marked by it even until today. The “first schism” between the Synagogue and the new-born Church was followed by rivalries and reciprocal attacks during the first three centuries; things aggravated to the detriment of the Jews after the victory and the conversion of Constantine (4th century).

#### **a) Teaching**

The picture of what Christians have written against the Jews throughout history is overwhelming for us, both in quantity and gravity. To quote only a few examples among thousands:

— The known abuses of St John Chrysostom: “For the deicide, no indulgence, no forgiveness possible”; “They massacre their off-springs and sacrifices them to the devil.”

— The sermons of Bossuet: “a cursed race, pursued by the blood of Christ” and “the justice of God needed an infinite number of victims.”

— In our days, the Catholic historian Daniel Rops (1946) found it normal that “the horror of pogroms compensate, in the secret equilibrium of the Divine Will, the unbearable horror of the Crucifixion.”

— Numerous pictures and sculptures, the popular teaching by pictures in the churches, expressed the same line of thought, as in the picture in Rhineland (now in a museum) representing Christ on the Cross holding a spear in one hand and piercing the heart of a Jew.

— Only recently have catechisms and missals been corrected.

## b) Acts

It is not surprising that parallel to this teaching there have been acts of violence which it is hardly possible to believe; we quote only a few examples:

— The bishop of Milan St Ambrose approved the burning of a synagogue by Christians.

— The slaughter of Jews by the Crusaders in Europe, sometimes with the complicity of the local bishops; imposed baptism or death — many committed suicide.

— Jews burned alive in their synagogue in Jerusalem by the Crusaders in the 12th Century.

— Serious calumnies (ritual murders, etc...) expulsions and massacres in the 13th century.

— Hundreds of thousands killed and burnt in the 14th Century. In Strasbourg, in 1349, men, women, children and old people were piled up on bonfires and burnt over 36 hours. In front of the condemned, a monk held up a cross.

— The Inquisition of the 15th Century imposed baptism; children taken from their parents, tortures, spying on private lives, and finally

— Expulsion of 300,000 Jews in 1492, exposing many to death, pirates and slavery.

— The liturgical blow given to the representative of the Jewish community during Good Friday ceremonies during 300 years. It went so far as to cut five wounds in the head of the Jewish representative to recall the wounds of Christ.

— In recent times, still, pogroms (fire and blood) in the Jewish quarters near where the procession of Good Friday passed — with the Cross at its head.

— Even in our times, injuries and blows given to Jewish children by Christian children after religious instruction (You have killed Christ). Certain of our friends who fled from Europe to take refuge in Israel have themselves kept some very painful memories.

One can say that the Cross has become, in the course of the history of the people of Israel, the symbol of a threat of misfortune.

When we read of all these events, of Christian teaching and certain liturgical texts in the course of history, and the reactions of Christians of Europe during the extermination of six million Jews by the Nazis, one cannot deny that this “teaching of scorn,” as it was called by a historian, prepared the ground for the catastrophe that arrived in “Christian” Europe. The German bishops had the courage to recognize, in 1945, 1961, and 1978–79, the part taken by Christian Germans in this drama, by act and by omission, and the influence of antisemitism on minds.

Certainly, there have been heroes: popes and bishops who have lifted their voices at different times against these excesses; those who saved Jews from extermination during Nazism; but all that cannot erase the memory of words and violent acts for which the clergy and the Christian people were culpable during the centuries. Vatican Council II turned a page, but there is still much to be done in the concrete realm. The reparation of seventeen centuries of errors, the request for forgiveness has not yet come. One is satisfied with phrases which avoid recognizing clearly our responsibility: "The Church deplores the persecutions and the manifestations of antisemitism whoever their authors are" (*Nostra Aetate*); or else one says "Let us forget our reciprocal faults." This evades the gravity and disproportion of our own faults. It therefore seems desirable to use a formula which clearly admits our faults and does not recall the faults of others ("The Jews also have their faults..."); otherwise, the request for forgiveness would be very much weaker. It is for the other party to recognize its faults, and there is such a dissymmetry in quantity and quality that to do otherwise would be shameful on our part. The proposed formula for the request for pardon has been composed bearing in mind the themes and formulas to which our Jewish brothers are sensitive and in avoiding phrases which would be misunderstood. The wound is still open in this people — because it has never been healed from generation to generation — and this explains (without excusing everything) many reactions due to a secular fear and the lack of assurance for the next day.

Political considerations ought not to hinder this historic gesture which goes beyond the present time. This gesture will have enormous repercussions on Jewish-Christian relationship throughout the world, and even — eventually — on the situation in the Middle East. In any case, it would be a positive step in the history of salvation of the human race.

*(Study group, Jerusalem, May 1983: Marcel Dubois, Yohanan Elihai, Rina Geftman.)*

*Immanuel* 17 (Winter 1983/84)