

# WHEN SIN DEFINES A CHURCH: TOWARDS A KENOSIS ECCLESIOLOGY IN POST-COLONIAL AGE

*Jimmy A. Belita, C.M.*

A document, *Memory and Reconciliation* (MR), was written to address the issue of the Church's faults and shortcomings in the past including the colonial period. It was received with mixed feelings: by those who accepted it, by those who felt skeptical about it, and by those who had misgivings. Just the same, the document still has to deal with the sinful role of the Church in a post-colonial world.

## PAPAL APOLOGIES

In 1522, Pope Adrian VI admitted to the scandals and abuses of the curia which included his predecessor, Leo X, who presided over the Church racked by the Protestant revolt. In our century, Paul VI asked pardon from God and the "separated brethren" of the Eastern Church for the past offenses of the Roman Catholic Church. John Paul II followed with his own exhortation for purification in his 1994 Apostolic Letter, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (TMA), in which he prayed for the Church so it could be more conscious of the sinfulness of her "children" when they departed from Christ and his gospel.<sup>1</sup>

This same pontiff later set up a commission presided by Cardinal Ratzinger to draw up a rationale for the asking of pardon for the past sins and to formulate guidelines for the preparation of such an act. The commission came up with a document, *Memory and*

---

1. John Paul II, "Tertio Millennio Adveniente: Apostolic Letter on the Preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000," in [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_jp\\_ii\\_apl\\_10111994\\_tertio\\_millennio\\_adveniente\\_en.htm](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp_ii_apl_10111994_tertio_millennio_adveniente_en.htm) (access 21.07.2006).

*Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*.<sup>2</sup> In introducing the document to the public, John Paul II reiterated what he mentioned before in *Ut Unum Sint*: a request for forgiveness for “the wrongs caused to non-Catholics, to the native people of Latin America and Africans deported as slaves, and to Africans for the way in which they had been treated.”<sup>3</sup> In effect, the Pope was thinking on how the Church, as a consequence, should act pastorally in post-colonial times.

The document basically presents a way for the Church in going about asking forgiveness for the sins of the past at the dawn of the third millennium of Christianity. MR’s readers are, first of all, reminded of John Paul’s statement in TMA concerning the appropriateness for the Church at the end of the second millennium to “become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel.”<sup>4</sup> MR also echoes *Lumen Gentium*’s call for purification among her “children” who might have participated, among others, in violation of human rights even only through silence or acquiescence to intolerance.<sup>5</sup> MR also has a very good documentation of the papal requests for forgiveness from among those who might have been psychically and culturally damaged in countries once colonized.<sup>6</sup> We presuppose positive responses to the humble acts of pontiffs in asking forgiveness. MR itself takes note of that in its introduction.

The requests for forgiveness made by the Bishop of Rome in this spirit of authenticity and gratuitousness have given rise to various reactions. The unconditional trust in the power of Truth which the Pope has shown has met with a generally favorable reception both inside and outside the Church. Many have noted the increased

---

2. International Theological Commission (ITC), “Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past,” in *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 29/39 (16 March 2000): 625-644. See also [http://vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/re\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000307\\_memory\\_recon\\_itc\\_en.html](http://vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/re_con_cfaith_doc_20000307_memory_recon_itc_en.html) (access 21.07.2006).

3. Ibid.

4. “As the Third Millennium Draws Near,” *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 24/24 (24 November 1994): 401-416.

5. Bernard P. Prusak, “Theological Considerations - Hermeneutical, Ecclesiological, Eschatological - Regarding Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past,” *Horizons* 32/1 (2005): 137.

6. ITC, “Memory and Reconciliation,” Section 1.3.

credibility of ecclesial pronouncements that has resulted from this way of acting.

We do not even have to find out why there would be such admirers. But what would rather draw our curiosity are the negative remarks that express certain reservations:<sup>7</sup>

“It is easier to seek pardon for acts you did not yourself commit;” “Reform is fine for others but not really needed for me;” “We are tired of apologies that we know ring false or come from people who did not commit certain acts;” “The Church admitted being wrong about Galileo but who cares? He is long dead.”

Bellitto makes light of this public avowal of pardon to seek forgiveness when you yourself did not commit the fault is much easier to do. It would be difficult on the other hand “to ask those who have been offended or physically hurt to hold the memory as one of reconciliation.”<sup>8</sup> We can admit that perhaps even those who have been wronged would rather decide to move on from that memory in as constructive a way as possible with little use for apologies coming from anyone.

Rhetorical questions do not just come from the resentful and the cynical; they also come from the fearful and the threatened within the Church. Here are the rhetoric of those who have misgivings concerning the Church’s confession of faults and asking of pardon:<sup>9</sup>

“If Church was wrong in the past, it can be wrong today and tomorrow. If it can be wrong on some things, it could be wrong on others. If so, what happens to its infallibility?”

“Would not the simple admission of faults look like acquiescence in face of accusations made by those who are hostile and prejudiced to the Church?”

“Would not the young be scandalized by the sins of the past?”

---

7. Christopher M. Bellitto, “Teaching the Church’s Mistakes: Historical Hermeneutics in Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and Faults of the Past,” *Horizons* 32/1 (2005): 124-125.

8. *Ibid.*, 126.

9. Bernard P. Prusak, “Theological Considerations,” 144.

“Can today’s conscience be assigned guilt for isolated historical phenomena like the Crusades or the Inquisition? Isn’t it too easy to judge people of the past by the conscience of today?”

Bellitto is of the opinion that “the claim of collective responsibility is a slippery slope and one which the church’s leadership has been working hard to avoid.”<sup>10</sup> The phrase that causes misgiving is “collective responsibility” which is inevitably linked to “collective guilt.” In a later discussion concerning the concept of collectivity which is on a “slippery slope,” so to speak, it would be very helpful to discuss this in the context of “social sin” which is on a firmer ground for being clearly described by the pope in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* and by liberation theologians. Meanwhile, we need to see first a synopsis of post-colonialism and the terrains it thrives in since it is from these places that the rhetoric of resentment and reservation has arisen.

## POST-COLONIALISM

Post-colonialism logically appeared after the colonial period situated in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has been appropriated by contemporary critical discourse in other disciplines. There are no clear boundaries here; in fact, it has been observed as a fuzzy concept by many critics.<sup>11</sup> “Post-colonial”, on the one hand, refers to the situation of lands that have been left by the colonizers but still bear the marks of dependency, economically, politically, socially, etc. The status may refer also to the former colonizers whose loss of their colonies reshaped their socio-politico-economic development. There is a downside, however, in post-colonialism which in some literature is designated as neo-colonialism.<sup>12</sup> The cooperation and assistance to the former redound to a new

---

10. Christopher M. Bellitto, “Teaching the Church’s Mistakes: Historical Hermeneutics in Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and Faults of the Past,” *Horizons* 32/1 (2005): 125.

11. See articles in “Postcolonialism Today: Theoretical Challenges and Pragmatic Issues,” Multidisciplinary Conference in Toronto (26-28 September 2002), <http://semitiocon.com/virtuals/postcol.htm> (access 21.07.2006).

12. Ibid.

domination and a new dependency concomitant with globalization which often result in the passing away of people's indigenous ways. In the egalitarian period, the technically advanced nations still predominate and abet a cultural homogenization that favors the West.

Colonization, characterized by long periods of forced dependency, sometimes violent in some parts of the globe, officially ended but only after creating a profound impact on the social and cultural fabric of the colonized. For the former colonizers, the extended contacts with societies they conquered and the eventual loss of profitable possessions influenced economic and cultural evolution too. Globalization is apparently a measure to make up for the losses and it seems it is doing what it is meant to be and with a vengeance. No wonder why post-colonial memory is making denunciation on new forms of economic and cultural oppression (neo-colonialism). Current cooperation, assistance and modernization might just be new forms of political and cultural domination. Globalization brings about cultural homogenization which means loss of indigenous ways of life and replacement by advanced dominant nations.

Subtle are the ways by which control is still maintained like granting or refusing the badly needed loans by the poor countries. It is ironic that the loan which is supposed to resurrect the economy instead brings down the economy together with the people's dignity, the reason being that the lender like the International Monetary Fund or World Bank dictates what steps the borrower has to take. The interests of IMF and WB have always proven to be detrimental to the economies of the borrowing nations.<sup>13</sup> Any semblance of benefit for the former colony is not likely to trickle down to the masses for it is most likely to be in favor of a few in that country anyway. Furthermore, these policies result in environmental devastation due to, say, open-pit mining and extensive logging in the process of cultivating these countries as "reservoirs of cheap labor and raw materials, while restricting their access to advanced production techniques."<sup>14</sup> Most of the time, the economies of the colonies were so structured that they became perpetually dependent on the West.

---

13. "Neocolonialism," <http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Neocolonialism> (access 21.07.2006).

14. *Ibid.*

The natives of the former colonies were destined to produce primary products processed in the West where pricing is determined.

We need not enumerate really the benefits that have accrued to the colonies like infrastructures, education, sanitation, and control of lethal diseases but they can be consigned to the background since the foreground is occupied by what ought to be righted. This is no place either to speculate on whether former colonies would have done better had they not been colonized. However, we presume that modernization is desirable and therefore the role of the West cannot easily be dismissed. The only lamentable fact is that this role has been very much limited to the capitalist system where the existence of classes becomes inevitable. If the world is a pyramid, at the bottom are the poor who carry the weight of the middle section whose inhabitants can still afford what is in the market. The poor, too, find themselves carrying the weight of those at the top, the super-rich.<sup>15</sup>

After denunciation should come reconstruction which is what post-colonial discourse aims to do in terms of giving back the identities of subordinated peoples, as well as “their pride of place in history, and with it the confidence to build on the record of their own ‘hybrid’ position of practice and negotiation.”<sup>16</sup> At one time a stigma, a “hybridity” or “*mestizaje*” among Hispanic Americans<sup>17</sup> should occupy now a central place in post-colonial discourse, which is a good example, according to Hoogvelt, of “reverse value-coding.” The mixed-breed curse has finally been exorcized and is now a sign of superior cultural intelligence for being “in-between and thus can negotiate the difference.”<sup>18</sup>

Aankie Hoogvelt makes a safe generalization on the post-colonial status of some African, Islamic, and Latin American countries. Many colonized countries in Africa have descended into anarchy

---

15. Tunde Obadina, “The Myth of Neo-colonialism (2005),” <http://afbis.com/aanalysis/neo-colonialism.html> (access 21.07.2006).

16. Aankie Hoogvelt, *Globalization and the Postcolonial World. The New Political Economy of Development* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 170.

17. Virgil Elizondo, *The Future is Mestizo. Life Where Cultures Meet* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

18. Aankie Hoogvelt, *Globalization and the Postcolonial World*, 170.

and civil wars, the most likely reason being that the colonizers naively left these people to be democratic when institutions for that system were not yet in place. The ensuing assistance from panicky donor nations excluded the beneficiaries from managing their own program of development. Among Islamic post-colonial countries, developmental efforts coming from the West clash with the fundamental religious renewal prompting believers of Islam to reject globalization and West-inspired modernization which the militants view as cultural imperialism. Latin American countries, for their part, do not reject globalization or modernity but as Hoogvelt observes, they want to find ways how to live with them and go beyond them. Post-colonial period in this part of the continent sees the state as the powerful and, at times, oppressive instrument of domination.<sup>19</sup> The post-colonial status of many Asian countries may be inferred more or less from similar experiences.

### ***MR*'S PARAMETERS FOR THE ASKING OF PARDON**

The International Theological Commission that drafted *MR* must have known from the beginning of their work that it would still be up to the pope to ask for forgiveness. We would not find in the document an explicit asking for forgiveness; it merely gives us the procedures on how to go about preparing for the event that the Church will ask for forgiveness. The document states its main objective which is to reflect theologically on the “conditions which make acts of purification of memory possible, in connection with the recognition of the faults of the past.” Before asking for forgiveness, several questions have to be answered first: “Why should it be done? Who should do it? What is the goal and how should this be determined, by correctly combining historical and theological judgment? Who will be addressed? What are the moral implications? And what are the possible effects on the life of the church and on society?”<sup>20</sup> Those questions would need detailed answers but that is not really the objective of this paper. It merely limits itself to answer

---

19. *Ibid.*, 171-172.

20. ITC, “Memory and Reconciliation,” *Origins* 29/39 (16 March 2000): 627.

the questions why it should be done and what are its implications to ecclesiology.

As MR asks the questions and anticipates questions on who constitute the church in order to own the fault or faults and which official body should be the one to ask for forgiveness, the document sums up an ecclesiology:

It is not a question of the historical institution alone or solely the spiritual communion of those whose hearts are illuminated by faith. The church is understood as the community of the baptized, inseparably visible and operating in history under the directions of her pastors, united as a profound mystery by the action of the life-giving Spirit. According to the Second Vatican Council, the church “by a strong analogy is compared to the mystery of the Incarnate Word as a living instrument of salvation, indissolubly united to him, so also in a not dissimilar way, the social structure of the church, is at the service of the Spirit of Christ which vivifies it for the building up of the body (cf. Eph 4: 1, 6).

This church, which embraces her sons and daughters of the past and of the present, in a real and profound communion, is the sole mother of grace who takes upon herself also the weight of past faults in order to purify memory and to live the renewal of heart and life according to the will of the Lord. She is able to do this insofar as Christ Jesus, whose mystical body extended through history she is, has taken upon himself once and for all the sins of the world.<sup>21</sup>

The above section gives us the ecclesiological basis to answer the many questions to be asked in laying the ground for the asking of forgiveness. But before this, the document expects that the *ecclesia* would undergo what it calls the “purification of memory.”

Purifying the memory means eliminating from personal and collective conscience all forms of resentment or violence left by the inheritance of the past, on the basis of a new and rigorous historical-theological judgment, which

---

21. Ibid.

becomes the foundation for a renewed moral way of acting. This occurs whenever it becomes possible to attribute to past historical deeds a different quality, having a new and different effect on the present, in view of progress in reconciliation in truth, justice, and charity among human beings and, in particular, between the Church and the different religious, cultural, and civil communities with whom she is related (MR 5, 1).

We find in many parts of MR the acceptance of Church's participation in the guilt which would occasion her to ask pardon. The document quotes John Paul's statement in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*:

An accurate historical judgment cannot prescind from careful study of the cultural conditioning of the times ... Yet the consideration of mitigating factors does not exonerate the Church from the obligation to express profound regret for the weaknesses of so many of her sons and daughters (MR 4.2 quoting TMA 35).

This same document disclaims for the faithful today a personal responsibility for the sins of those who lived in the past, although we bear the burden of the sins in virtue of our being one with the sinners. If some friars in the Philippines, for instance, committed abuses in the past, those were their personal sins and they should have asked pardon from their victims there and then, just as a pedophile today should ask for forgiveness from the victim and suffers penalization. However, the Church today including the faithful suffers the burden of those sins like mistrust, bad name, and stigmatized illegitimate offspring.

The Church discourages generalizations and instead proposes strongly "a correct historical judgment, which is also the foundation of the theological evaluation." (MR 4). It states further:

One must ask: What precisely occurred? What exactly was said and done? ..... Only when there is moral certainty that what was done in contradiction to the Gospel in the name of the Church by certain of her sons and daughters could have been understood by them as such and avoided can it have significance for the Church of today to make amends for faults of the past (MR 4).

The search for the true historical past is no problem; neither will the discovery that the Church is guilty. What would be ironically problematic is ultimately the investigator's declaration (if it comes to that) of the Church's innocence. The consequent Church's declaration of its innocence would sound like a self-serving exoneration of guilt. The better pastoral solution might be to go to the next concept of participatory guilt and responsibility modeled after the phenomenon of "osmosis." If it sounds like a generalization so be it for what is important here is the Church's part in the "satisfaction" (just like in the sacrament of penance) for the post-colonial sins. For sure, it will not just be a bunch of "Our Fathers" and "Hail Marys!"

The Church should pursue the historical truth even only for intra-ecclesial interests when political implications might beg for prudence. The outcome of the search is expected to put in the foreground past historical deeds with a quality that will advance truth, justice and love in our contemporary world. Purifying the memory should not be relegated to the cognitive dimension but should be shown in deeds.

Emblematic models of such an effect, which a later authoritative interpretative judgment may have for the entire life of the Church, are the reception of the Councils or acts like the abolition of mutual anathemas. These express a new assessment of past history, which is capable of producing a different characterization of the relationships lived in the present. The memory of division and opposition is purified and substituted by a reconciled memory, to which everyone in the Church is invited to be open and to become educated (MR 5, 1).

We should always bear in mind here that confession of the sins of the past and purification of memory are not academic exercise but pastoral functions intended to reform the Church (*ecclesia semper reformanda*) and, ultimately, for the building up of the Kingdom. Neither should it be looked at as a judicial process where the expected outcome is a judicial sentencing of the guilty. Although the document is asking for a historical evaluation and theological judgment, it also brings in an ethical evaluation that would determine the appropriateness of its proceedings. Personal confession for the fault

of the past needs an establishment of personal guilt. But when we are dealing with a collective entity how do we establish guilt?

## COLLECTIVE GUILT AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

The document states a difficult situation:

The difficulty that emerges is that of defining past faults, above all, because of the historical judgement which this requires. In events of the past, one must always distinguish the responsibility or fault that can be attributed to members of the Church as believers from that which should be referred to society during the centuries of 'Christendom' or to power structures in which the temporal and spiritual were closely intertwined. An historical hermeneutic is therefore more necessary than ever in order to distinguish correctly between the action of the Church as community of faith and that of society in the times when an osmosis existed between them (MR 1, 4).

For the Church to be asking pardon, there has to be guilt and for guilt to exist there has to be responsibility. Martin Buber distinguishes between "objective moral guilt" resulting from our "sinful transgression of the divine pattern for human life" or "from moral wrong in our relationships with other people."<sup>22</sup> Psychological guilt arising from experience of guilty feelings may or may not arise from objective moral guilt. The objective moral guilt against God can be dealt with by experiencing divine forgiveness; and the one against people can be dealt with by experiencing the transgressed's forgiveness. Sorrow for the offense or offenses must be constructive and directed lovingly towards others "in an attempt to move beyond the wrong into a creative reshaping of future possibilities." Without it, forgiveness will not be complete.

It is not difficult to infer personal responsibility from personal guilt. What is more problematic is collective guilt and collective responsibility. In recent history, how many young Germans have

---

22. David J. Atkinson, "Guilt," in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, eds. David Atkinson and David Field (Downers Grove: Publisher, 1995), 425.

cried foul at the notion of collective responsibility imputed upon them also when the holocaust is hardly in their memory? Andrew Schaap, in his article “Guilty Subjects and Political Responsibility,” compares and discusses the responses of two philosophical luminaries: Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers who believe that the people are responsible.

They agree that, by virtue of their membership in a political community, all citizens are indeed collectively responsible for reparations to those wronged by the state. This liability, however, does not imply moral blame since such political responsibility is imputable on the bases of association rather than the actions and intentions of each person.<sup>23</sup>

Important in Arendt’s and Jaspers’ respective positions is the distinction between blame and responsibility. “Blame implies intent, whereas responsibility refers to the liability of your position in society.”<sup>24</sup> This distinction made a lot of difference in how the Jews were treated in Europe before and during the Great Wars.

Another approach to collective responsibility is to approach “sin as sickness which needs healing.”<sup>25</sup> We are not responsible for the sin of Adam but we bear its consequences. In the gospel section that narrates Jesus’ asking his audience if they think the murdered Galileans or those killed by the falling Siloam tower were worse sinners because of the tragedy, the Lord’s answer is: “No, but unless you repent you will also likewise perish” (Lk. 13:1-5). What Jesus is saying is that the tragedy that has befallen the Galileans is related not only to Pilate’s sins but also to his victim’s sins and those of humanity.

Although those to whom He is speaking are not the direct cause of what has happened (the murder of the Galileans), Jesus nonetheless wants them to feel themselves concerned, implicated and personally responsible for what has happened—and could happen

---

23. Andrew Schaap, “Guilty Subjects and Political Responsibility: Arendt, Jaspers and the Resonance of the ‘German Question’ in Politics of Reconciliation,” *Political Studies* 49 (2001): 750.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Emanuel Rackman, “Collective Responsibility,” *The Jewish Weekly* (15-21 March 1991) in <http://www.jonathan.pollard.org/1991/031591.htm> (access 21.07.2006).

again if they continue to sin. This is why He calls them to repentance.<sup>26</sup>

A bystander observing the collapsing towers in New York on 9/11 could not but feel indignant and angry against the perpetrators of the atrocity (“only if I can lay my hands on them...”). But he realized immediately that he would just be adding his personal sins to Adam’s sins and he would be developing the consequences of Adam’s sins along with the killers of 9/11. That is tantamount to assisting the epidemic-like spread of sin in the world. Schoonenberg talks similarly about “the contamination of evil and the infectiousness of moral action” in considering the social nature of sin or solidarity in sin as found in Jn 1:29. While seeing in the scriptures the entire people of Israel having sinned in common, Schoonenberg sees as misleading “to speak of collective guilt” because guilt is a free personal act and cannot be passed from one to another. It is more right to talk about the milieu of sin.<sup>27</sup>

For Arendt, the acknowledgement of collective guilt is a “plea of personal and political irresponsibility.”<sup>28</sup> Similar to “everybody’s business is nobody’s business,” so is the view that when everybody pleads guilty nobody is responsible. One can claim s/he is only a bureaucrat doing what s/he is supposed to do. But then, where is the personal responsibility? Or according to an ideology that s/he is merely an outcome of history or nature, so where is the responsibility? Arendt sees bureaucracy and ideology as obstructions to political responsibility. Political responsibility is a *sine qua non* for the pursuit of social justice which cannot be merely realized through individual responsibility. We certainly have to learn from history that collectivist philosophies and movements have been associated with totalitarian systems like communism, fascism, and Nazism, and that imputing collective guilt on the Jewish race set off the process leading to Holocaust.<sup>29</sup> It was an example of blurring the difference between

---

26. Ibid.

27. Piet Schoonenberg, “Sin,” in *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. 6, ed. Karl Rahner et al (London: Herder and Herder/Burns and Oates, 1930), 90.

28. Andrew Schaap, “Guilty Subjects and Political Responsibility,” 752.

29. Theodore Weber, “Collective Responsibility,” in James F. Childress and John Macquarrie, *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 99.

responsibility (referring to a liability in society arising from one's position) and blame (implying intent to do something drastic against the "guilty and responsible").

To sum up, the notions of collective guilt and responsibility admit blurred areas. Responsibility can be attributed to the individual or a corporate entity and, therefore, guilt can be attributed likewise. Diachronically, however, that is, across history, collective guilt and responsibility can only be conceived in metaphors of "sickness" or milieu or a social situation. But, even if there is no such personal responsibility and guilt imputed on individuals, strong is the call for a united society to own the responsibility for rectifying the wrongs committed and for reshaping future possibilities (part of the meaning of forgiveness) for a peaceful tomorrow. The Church's disclaimer from its sinfulness and attributing that to "children" would sound more like the rhetoric of exoneration and not an initial call for atonement.

## **SOCIAL SIN**

The Church might neither be the author of the values of the dominant class in the colonies nor was it the creator of structures but it participates sometimes in bringing about unjust structures. We have seen above that collective responsibility should not necessarily lead to collective blame. MR strongly advises historical evaluation and theological judgment as prerequisite for asking forgiveness. Many who learned of that humble gesture did not respond favorably because the plea for forgiveness did not much any guilt by the other. Minute attention might be given to the evaluations but they are better kept for our information. After all, solidarity in grace and sin does not necessarily include clear and genuine studies but more the observable sentiment of feeling regret for the evils of colonialism to which the Church has contributed. Thus, the issue of social sin is inevitable. Pope John Paul II in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (SRS) points out some alarming social realities.

Moreover, one must denounce the existence of economic, financial and social mechanisms which, although they are manipulated by people, often function almost automatically, thus accentuating the situation of wealth

for some and poverty for the rest. These mechanisms, which are maneuvered directly or indirectly by the more developed countries, by their very functioning favor the interests of the people manipulating them (SRS 16).

The pontiff follows this up by stating that these are structures of sin and their sinfulness is rooted in the personal sins of people who introduced them and even keep on maintaining them (SRS 36). The sinfulness in the structure does exonerate people; however, it brings out a reality that transcends individuals and highlights a new brand of sin which some prefer to call “social sin.” One bishop, for example, Thomas Gumbleton, in a pastoral letter, “Peacemaking as a Way of Life,” adopts a definition formulated by Bryan Hehir: “Social sin is a situation in which the very organization of some level of society systematically functions to the detriment of groups or individuals in society.”<sup>30</sup> Clearly, not only can social structures be obstacles to the development of the poor and the powerless, they can also be oppressive. Participation in the structures enables us to maintain them and abet the dire effects unwittingly or not.<sup>31</sup> From this perspective all analyses would lead us to look into their effects on the poor who are always at the bottom of the pile.

Structures of sin do not only implicate their authors but they actually spread sin by appearing more fearsome than what they actually are, thus, scaring the people from overcoming them. They permeate society and entrench in it so people start to believe that they are helpless and renounce responsibility. Furthermore, structures of sin make obscure our true awareness of the universal common good.<sup>32</sup> Sinful structures offer an alternative vision even contrary to the gospel and as they are so interwoven into the fabric of society, it is a challenge to comprehend them and see them as sinful.<sup>33</sup> Thus, we really cannot avoid being entangled in the mesh of social sin. Many of our defense mechanisms operate without our being aware so that they distort the total picture.

---

30. Scott Steinkerchner, “To Live Like Dives with Lazarus at the Gate,” in [http://www.op.org/social\\_sin.html](http://www.op.org/social_sin.html) (access 21.07.2006).

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

## BY-PRODUCT OF *MR*: A KENOSIS ECCLESIOLOGY

The blurred boundary between individual and group responsibility would welcome any form of theory that will bridge that gap. Social sciences might supply theories such as “corporate oneness (common identity, mind, consciousness, will); necessary interdependence between group structures and individual members; representation (including tacit); and common benefit.”<sup>34</sup> A pluralistic approach to bridging individual and group responsibility might, after all, prove to be the better approach in which solidarity is future-and-developmental oriented rather than dwelling in minute details concerning historical culprits. A need for a new ecclesiology is not just called for by practical demand of global politics into which the Church is drawn whether it likes it or not. But it has to draw from its rich but untapped sources to respond better to the new challenges. *MR* has mined into that source.

In expressing its need for “purification of memory” the Church can put in the background its infallible status and put in the foreground its time-bound fallibility and space-bound limitations. The document calls it “an act of courage and humility in recognizing the wrongs done by those who have borne or bear the name of Christian” (*MR* Introduction). It calls for more novel ecclesial forms and policies worth the cardinal virtue of courage. To trumpet the same marks of the Church without the new nuances of a kenotic Church would not be an act of courage and humility. Furthermore, it would even take in humble stride a reductionistic interpretation of forgiveness as a cultural adaptation “accomplished largely through powerful stories thinly disguised as historical narratives” needed as conflict resolution device by a larger human society.<sup>35</sup> It would not be totally gratuitous to state that one of the reasons why the Church has survived that long is that it adapts adroitly to different social climates and different environments. Thus, the so-called memory is not merely stretched to its historical roots but also to its evolutionary origin and its purification should lead to path of reconciliation.

---

34. Theodore Weber, “Collective Responsibility,” 99.

35. David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin’s Cathedral, Evolution, Religion and the Nature of Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 217.

The notion of social sin has added a new ecclesiological dimension, humbling but valid. In response to the call for purification of memory through self-examination, the Church discovers in itself sinful patterns, mechanisms and structures reflecting distorted consciousness, biased policies.<sup>36</sup> In the theory of social sin we also uncover the destructive power of collective blindness, bias, and prejudice (a Lonerganian notion), and a “distorted discourse” found in ideology (a Habermasian analysis). These analytical points are important to the Church in its attempt to articulate the reality of social sins as “distorted ideology, as blindness, and bias which do not always surface to our consciousness and intentionality but actually sway our judgments and decisions that serve to sustain relations of dominations.”<sup>37</sup> Without rejecting a personalist paradigm for the Church, we can rightfully say with Hinze that “the cutting edge of the argument is that the Church, like other social bodies, can be sinful as a social entity.”<sup>38</sup>

MR inputs the notion of communion not only of the saints but also of sinners:

Communion in the one Holy Spirit also establishes a communion of ‘saints’ in a diachronic sense, by virtue of which the baptized of today feel connected to the baptized of yesterday and - as they benefit from their merits and are nourished by their witness of holiness - so likewise they feel the obligation to assume any current burden from their faults, after having discerned these by attentive historical and theological study (MR 4,2).

The doctrine of *communio sanctorum* teaches us of “a living mutual bond of love and prayer between the dead and the living”: both transcending in their use of the limitations of time and space.<sup>45</sup> In the light of the emerging doctrine of social sin that implicates collective responsibility, the same communion can be viewed humbly and kenotically as a *communio peccatorum* (MR 4.2). Prompted by such considerations, James Buckley calls the Church, “a sinful Church of

---

36. Bradford E. Hinze, “Ecclesial Repentance and the Demands of Dialogue,” *Theological Studies* 61/2 (June 2000): 230.

37. *Ibid.*, 231.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, 232.

sinners.”<sup>40</sup> This is drastically different from simply being a holy Church where some of her children are sinners. An evolutionary and dynamic view of the Church would see it correctly as sinful if sin is interpreted, as in the bible, as not yet hitting the mark for it is still on its way towards the Kingdom. From the viewpoint of culture, an inculturated Church is a sinful Church not necessarily because of culture but because culture itself is also a bearer of sinful structures.

In reference to the sinful Church, less explanation will preserve better the power of its being a paradox. A theologian, meanwhile, must assuage the disturbed minds of those who would rather see “a Church of sinners” than “a sinful Church.” To such members of the Church here is Buckley’s assurance:

Teaching that the Church is a sinful Church seems to be a piece of common sense modeled on the infidelities of Israel and the disciples, pastors and theologians, rich and poor. The point here may not be that God is not at work transforming this community from sinner to communion of saints but that these soterial moments go on simultaneously with massive sin. We might argue that only if we take the sinful Church to be a rule of faith can we understand why the creed confesses this to be a holy community: a sinful Church must insist that it is by the grace of God alone that this sinful Church is a holy Church.<sup>47</sup>

Here, we are reminded of Luther’s description that a human being is *simul justus et peccator* (both just and sinner). Metaphysically, both notions are contradictory by definition but phenomenologically they make sense. Great saints would express their conviction that they were the greatest sinners in the world. It made them humble and understanding of other people’s weaknesses. The Church would in no way violate its nature and mission if it accepts its being sinful if only because it always falls short of the demands of the Kingdom and it is committed to the solidarity with sinners.

---

40. James J. Buckley, *Seeking the Humanity of God. Practices, Doctrines, and Catholic Theology* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press 1992), 92.

41. *Ibid.*

## PRAXIS OF “SATISFACTION” BY THE CHURCH IN POST-COLONIAL PHILIPPINES

We mentioned earlier that people might not have committed sin and therefore are not personally liable; yet they can still bear the consequences of the sin. In colonial period, the Church might not have been directly involved in exploitative commerce and oppressive policies of the secular power, yet the Church participated in the social sin and therefore should participate in the “satisfaction”. We do not expect the Church to take the place of the former colonizers to make up for the economic sins they committed in the past against the colonies such as the destruction of the environment and depletion of resources. For the Church to venture into such developmental projects when secular powers are around would just unnecessarily make it as an object of false expectation. The Church should engage itself in what it can handle best, and that is education — education for the people to unlearn the disvalues in colonial and post-colonial periods. That will be a new twist to the purification of memory.

I am going to present only one potential praxis: dialogue (presumably, there are more but I limit myself to this one). The kenosis ecclesiology mandates the Church in confession or the penitential Church to dialogue with its virtual “victims,” that is, those who might have been “wounded” by the Church which practically shared the same interests during colonial times with the colonial masters through osmosis, as MR prefers to describe such relationship. I am thinking especially of the Philippine Independent Church whose founding fathers must have been shortchanged by the colonizers’ Church. I am also thinking of the Muslim Filipinos who were systematically shut off from the political process by Filipino leaders who were undoubtedly influenced by the colonial Church’s mindsets and prejudices. Lastly, my mind goes to a group that has not been participatory in local and national politics for lack of cognitive and technological skills. I am referring to our indigenous Filipinos whom the elite-dominated educational system of the Church had relegated to the periphery for a long time. Dialogue will not merely be a medium here but also, and more importantly, a cathartic and healing penance.

We presented at the beginning the cynical remarks of those who speak the rhetoric of resentment. They are, in a way, right in their claim that it is easy to ask pardon for the sins that one has not really committed since it is claiming that it was really the “children” that did. They hit the nail on the head when they remark that asking pardon is irrelevant when the issues for which pardon is being asked have long been dead and all persons concerned are long gone. Dialogue provides the occasion for deeper realization of the sins of the past from the perspective of the “victims” and leads the parties involved in dialogue to a common understanding of the historical past. Dialogue paves the way for the inevitable asking of pardon which the others cannot refuse because of the implicit commitment on both sides.

Those who speak the rhetoric of misgivings should realize that the discourse of atonement matters more even if it calls for a self-emptying (*kenosis*) by the Church. Here is an appropriate paragraph from Hinze’s article:

Through dialogue, which can include awkward moments and painful silence, an individual may be led into the purifying dark night of the soul, where deception, delusion, repression, and blindness can be illuminated. Dialogue provides the occasion for the residual projections of idolatry and of the false self to be brought into a purifying light. An examination of conscience can provide an individual the means for entering into dialogue with God, with the self, and indeed with the internalized voices of the community, about individual actions and patterns of behavior. Through the multifaceted processes of interior dialogue new light can be shed on the person’s behavior and a fuller awareness of sin can emerge.<sup>42</sup>

In the atmosphere of dialogue, there is more freedom from pressure to say anything including asking pardon and also more freedom to accept pardon when asked. But when that milieu of genuine dialogue truly exists, who needs to say the explicit things when, in fact, the right statements to declare can be more eloquent in silence.

---

42. Bradford E. Hinze, “Ecclesial Repentance and the Demands of Dialogue,” 234.