Sinful Church, Divine Pardon

David N. Power, O.M.I.

A renowned sacramental theologian offers a fresh look at the meaning of repentance and forgiveness in the face of personal and corporate sin of the past and present. He challenges communities to image anew the merciful face of Christ in asking pardon, extending pardon, and showing people ways to pardon.

In the Jubilee Year 2000, Pope John Paul II invited all, and in particular Christians, to confess, lament, and repent the sins of the past, and to ask pardon of the living and of the dead. In his message for World Peace Day 2002, he invited the world to go beyond simple acts of repentance, when in the wake of horrifying terrorist actions, he urged peoples to pave a road to peace built on justice, and a way of justice built on forgiveness. Moreover, various public bodies have, in recent years, made public apologies for deeds of the past: we remember France’s request for pardon for the complicity of the Vichy regime with the Nazi persecution of the Jews, the apologies offered in some Latin American countries for the atrocities committed under military dictatorships, and the regrets expressed by the United States Government for the treatment of peoples of Japanese origins during World War II. In Germany, the call continues to be made for a nation’s acknowledgment of complicity with the crimes of the Nazi era.

We are dealing here not with a customary practice of sacramental penance but with the reality of corporate confession, in a public forum. This article will examine how Churches are implicated in the sin while being called to participate

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in the difficult and complex response. It will approach the question under three headings: the impossible pardon, the Church’s place in the exercise of a ministry of reconciliation, and the possible path towards the impossible pardon.

The Impossible Pardon

About a decade ago a book was published in French, with the title Le pardon and a subtitle which could be translated, “breaking the cycle of debt and forgetting” (Abel). Several contributors to the book saw the issue in the light of what they spoke of as the impossible pardon, noting that the topic could be considered today only in the light of what seems unpardonable. The French title of the book allows for a play on words: in face of the unpardonable, true pardon is given only par don, that is to say it can be given only as true gift. It is false when it is used as a means of domination. It may not exact what the other is to do with the pardon but risks looking for a new beginning to which both offended and offender commit themselves. This, of course, also means that pardon can be given only to one who accepts it: otherwise, it is simply an offer of pardon, generous perhaps but without consequence.

The book also pointed out how seldom societies grant pardon in a full sense of the word. At times, in penal codes, there is the decision not to pardon but to inflict punishment, in the name of the good of society. There may also be an imposition of sanctions or the exaction of a payment of debt, to make compensation for wrong done, then allowing the culprit back into society, debts paid. On occasions when a country wants to move on, out of a situation of violent opposition and perhaps terror, there is the granting of amnesty. This may involve a practical consignment of past infractions to oblivion, putting events into the category of “best forgotten.” It is also possible for a people faced with its own inequities and iniquities of the past to make apologies and some effort at compensation, by way of financial endowment, posthumous rehabilitation, or entitlement programs. The difficulty of moving forward through a reconciliation which does not consign the past to oblivion but seeks a new starting-point in full recognition of offense given and taken was illustrated in the heroic efforts of the South African Commission on Truth and Reconciliation in the days following the end of a regime of apartheid.

Where the matter becomes truly complex is when pardon has to be asked of the dead and not only of the living. How is it possible to ask pardon in the name...
of the dead, of victims of past generations, or to dare to speak for the dead in granting pardon, while permitting the living to be reconciled with their memories? Only those may speak today who keep memory, who live in solidarity with those who have suffered, or dare to confess solidarity with those who have injured and offended. This requires a memory that is not just recalling but means actually living out of the past, a true mimesis and poesis of the past, in all its anguish, which even through such a hard passage expresses openness to a future of communion. In what is remembered, the living and the inheritors are now one with those who have gone before. The lives of the victims were made to seem as nothing. Can we indeed say that we can ask their forgiveness, allowing that their lives be now made something through remembrance, retrieved from the dead past in a hope which enables us to walk into the future? As a race, we have only made a few hesitant steps along this path.

**Christian Faith in the Gift of Pardon**

As Christians, we may be as reluctant as anyone to enter the dark. One wonders whether we Christians, despite the solidarity which we profess in Christ, have ever succeeded in living the memory of the past, of a complicity with those who went before, remembering this as vividly as we profess a story of grace, knowing that in the order of things there also lurks a story of sin and offense. On various fronts, the Catholic Church has tried its hand at making confession and apology, and even asking pardon. There is a serious effort here to remember what has been consigned to oblivion, to admit what has too often been excused, and to look for ways to redress wrongs. The Church in the U.S.A. these days has found itself in the position of asking pardon of those who have been the victims of sexual abuse by clergy, and taking steps towards making some compensation, but standing yet upon the threshold of the full implications of the asking of pardon, where reparation is never up to the measure of the offense. There is the risk of cutting short the process of reconciliation at the point of meting out punishments and offering sums of compensation, whereas it is vital to go beyond this. Here also the stopping point may be marked by the difficulty of realizing the extent of solidarity with offended and offender. How hard it is to take on the onerous task of remembering and narrating.

**Pardon as God’s Gift**

We are used, all too used, to the metaphor of Pasch as passage. We can quite easily see it simply as Jesus’ passage through death to life, and then our passage from the death of sin to life in the Spirit. Can we possibly find in this
image also a metaphor for our passage in Christ through the death that still afflicts humankind, not generically but in all too concrete instances, death dealt out to humans by humans? And if so, whence comes light, whence life?

What the Christian Gospel confesses is that pardon comes, does indeed come, from God, not only in the sense that it is God who in the end forgives but also in the sense that any pardon that humans offer to offenders or to each other, originates in the pardon that comes from God to a sinful humanity. What the Gospel of Jesus Christ gives us is the amazing story of God's solidarity with sinful humanity, that makes forgiveness and life, even after the sin against sister and brother, possible. It is given in the person of the mediator, Jesus Christ, who enters the dark valley of the reign of sin and death, and in this process is the one in whom walls break down, who brings a superabundance of grace where sin abounded, whose death for sin is a beginning of an era of grace where all are empowered to forgive even enemies—once they acknowledge the solidarity of sinners, the origins of sin, and the true origins of life, of light, of what is yet to come in the gracious advent of the Creator, known in the Trinity of gift to the world. Rhetoric and theology have always stuttered in finding words and images to express that solidarity of Christ with sinners which spells out a new origin of life, or a retrieval of the life that God poured into the divine creation, “from the beginning,” as it is said in Genesis without specific chronological intent but as an embrace of all times. We profess that from this source of grace all grace may come, and that Churches have the awesome mission to show this face to the world.

The Church's Ministry of Reconciliation

What is new for the Churches today is that they can exercise no ministry of reconciliation without confessing their own sinfulness and their own responsibility for the deeds of both past and present. In the name of Christ, they are sent to exercise a ministry of pardon even while they are themselves under sentence. The Gospel impels them to mediate to the world the offer of a divine face of mercy, of pardon, of reconciliation between offender and offended, to the world, opening up a new future even out of humanity's wreckage of God's peaceable kingdom. It is a mission given to the Church as Body of Christ, itself still simul justus et peccator. It is not explicable in simple terms of a possession of the keys of jurisdiction, nor by the claim to have dominion over sin and grace, but it is a mission given to a body, which, like Jeremiah, stutters but is yet confided with the key of proclaiming the Word. To carry out this mission, three actions need attention: Christians have to ask pardon for their own offenses, they have to extend pardon in new ways to persons in their midst, and they have to show to the world the ways in which peoples may engage on the road to pardon and reconciliation.
A Confessing Church

The need of Churches themselves to confess and ask pardon is perhaps the most urgent and the most difficult task of the present, since it involves their own self-recognition, a judgment on their past and an evocation of their mission as Church of Christ. Two issues need to be singled out and then a longer chain of fault considered.

Before the Catholic Church walked this path, Churches engaged in the Ecumenical Movement and in its organizations saw the need for Churches to ask forgiveness of one another and to ask forgiveness of the world, because of the divisions found in Christ’s Body. The scandal of division is a counter-testimony and requires a serious confession of those sins of the past and present which have caused schism. Both the Second Vatican Council and Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint* (That They May Be One, 1995), have invited Catholics to confess their part in bringing about division in the past and in perpetuating it in the present. It is a confession that requires change of behavior and of speech, maybe well summarized in the admonition to speak always in truth and in justice of other Christian bodies.

Churches are gradually awakening to the need to confess sins against the Jewish people, sins of calumny that date back to the very origins of Christianity, sins of persecution that run through the policies of local churches, including Rome and Wittenberg, right through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and sins of silence and complicity that date as recently as the time of the Shoah in the past century. This is indeed a large field for the purification of memories.

Within the last decade, the Catholic Church in its representatives has come to a fuller sense of its sinfulness and the offenses committed against others. Very specific historic transgressions have been mentioned, such as offenses against the person or the memory of such as Galileo and John Hus, or indeed Calvin, Luther, and Zwingli. Groups to whom apologies are offered include all the women whose place in the Church has been undernourished or unrecognized, cultural and ethnic peoples evangelized by Europeans on other continents with great disregard for their histories and cultural traditions, homosexuals who have been made the object of approbrium, and children who have been the prey of sexual predators and whose plight was subordinated to what was blindly seen as the good of the Church and its reputation. In this task of ecclesial confession, the

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purification of memories is vital, but also the need for the Church to retrieve its true identity as the community of Christ’s disciples, pledged to give testimony to the Gospel and often to restructure itself, or renew its preaching, its liturgy and its canons of Church Law.

Today, ironically and justly but also mercifully, the Church cannot exercise its ministry of pardon and reconciliation except as a sinful Church, standing in need of mercy itself, not only in its members but in its corporate identity. Today in face of accusations of sexual abuse, the Church in the U.S.A. has asked forgiveness, but this keeps calling the Church back to a sincere acknowledgment of complicity and solidarity. We all lived and live out of the sin and the sinful structures. In face of court inquiries and imposition of damages, we may feel compelled to say that we could not be expected to “have known then what we know now.” But is sin not darkness? Have we not lived the sin as a Church? Must we not, through memory, seek a solidarity with both sinner and victim, a veritable kenosis through which we have to pass in the passage to new life in Christ, as members and as a body? Naming not only bad acts but sinful structures and the thought that went into their making is integral to this self-emptying which says that true power in God and in Christ is not living by the structures of power and honor professed in society.

We acknowledge the truth of being a Church that is simul justus et peccator, in our very reality of being the Body of Christ in the world, in the time before the end. The Church itself is both just and sinful, it does not simply include persons who though justified remain sinners. Our meditation on the Cross of Christ and his descent into the place of the dead “deconceals” not only the extent of his abandon by the Father’s love but also his identification in his death with sinners and with those who are the victims of sin. While ecclesiology often speaks of the identification of the risen Christ with the poor and the persecuted on the basis of Matthew 26 and the story of Paul’s dramatic conversion, there is a tendency to think that his identification with sinners was a once and for all drama in his moment of death or that is confined, in the present, to those who suffer. However, the empty tomb, the ascent to the right hand, and the pouring out of the Spirit, speak to us of a continuing identification of the Body of Christ in the world with a body of saints and sinners, indeed with a communion of people who in the memory of Christ and the promptings of the Spirit are ever caught in the struggle between two freedoms, the aspiring freedom of self-determination and the freedom born of the Spirit.
We find this struggle embodied even in the most sublime moments of life, in the way in which, liturgically and canonically, the Church recalls its traditions and gives its testimony, for better or for worse. As the Body struggles within itself and in its worldly exchange with this disharmony of life and structure and even teaching, it is still, and in that very way, Christ’s Body, and Christ embraces it with the love given to the body of the beloved. There still remains the identification of Christ with his sinful membership in its ungainly effort to live in obedience to the Father as he lived it out, disgracefully or disgraced, unto the death of the Cross.

The Internal Practice of Pardon and Reconciliation

The Catholic Church seems aware, to what extent it is not clear, that the reduction of penitential discipline to the sacrament of confession and absolution in the second millennium of its apostolic ministry was inadequate to its mission to exercise the keys of binding and loosing. With the revision of the books of liturgical practice after the Second Vatican Council some amends were made but, pastorally, local churches have still to unravel the cat’s cradle of division into three rituals, accompanied by a body of services of the Word for times of year and various occasions.

It is with urgency that the Church has to keep alive among its members the proclamation of divine forgiveness and justice, allowing that it is from this source that the Church derives its entire being and action. The Church’s appeal to scriptures and its preaching is deserving of constant attention and renewal, for the words of Christians have all too often been words of condemnation, evoking fear and trembling instead of heavenly joy over children returning and sinners doing penance.

No renewal of practice is possible without giving thought to the issue of those to whom words of Gospel admonition are to be addressed, and of those to whom forgiveness and reconciliation is to be offered. Without wishing to exaggerate, we know that financial profiteers are more likely to gain place at the Eucharistic table than persons once divorced and remarried. Sorting this out is connected with first the proper naming of sin, but second with the extension of pardon to those who today are much subject to the pressures of current cultural and social conditions, to those in other words who need help and mercy and towards whom the face of God revealed in Christ is turned, and ought to be mirrored in the face of the Church. Much theological and pastoral consideration needs to be given to the Church’s way of approaching the divorced and remarried among its members, those of homosexual orientation, those who are publicly accused of sexual violation, even on episcopal web sites, and various political offenders, such as those imprisoned because of their protests against wars and military might.
This is an agenda which calls out to be pursued in all seriousness and in light of a divine pardon which exceeds that of the human.

God’s Mercy on the World

In a time when it knows that it is not proper to condemn others or exact conversion, the Church is always moved in its encounter with others by the memory of a divine visage of mercy which the Church is called to show to the world. This visage it knows in the visage of Christ, a visage stern at times in its refusal of sin but always full of kindness and mercy. It is a face from which shine forth the origins of life, goodness, beauty, offered to a world that can return, through the passage backward in the naming of sin, to its true and gratuitous beginnings, there to find the point from which the world may live in peace. As already recalled, when speaking to the world on World Peace Day 2002, John Paul II enunciated the axiom, no peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness, but it needs to be noted that he went on to add: “Only to the degree that an ethics and a culture of forgiveness prevail can we hope for a ‘politics’ of forgiveness, expressed in society’s attitudes and laws, so that through them justice takes on a more human character” (no. 8, 464).

The Impossible Made Possible

This is all too brief a delineation of where the Churches are situated in the ministry of reconciliation, and each point needs much thought, prayer, and discussion. A brief reflection on the first twelve chapters of the book of Genesis suggests a path to follow in each of the areas mentioned, so as to live by the gift of pardoning even the unpardonable.

The twelfth chapter of Genesis recounts God’s alliance with Abraham. The first eleven chapters, written in mythic style, are, as it were, the human memory which is engaged by this offer of covenant to one taken out of a sinful world to make peace with God for his and Sarah’s descendants. Within this memory, chapters 4 to 11 portray the full extent of the reign of sin under which the world lives: fratricide, extermination of rival, disrespect across generations, disregard for true partnership in marriage, and literally monumental ambitions of power and glory that end up by causing division and dispersion. This may bring the sin to memory but it does not yet ask the question whence comes this sin and whither the God of alliance enters the scene. Thus Genesis 2 to 3 tells mythically of the origin of sin in a way that portrays a universal solidarity in sin and an origin in the desire to be oneself arbiter of good and evil, even in neglect of the beauty of a world that comes from the hand of God. If alliance has its origins in
God, so must life itself, so must the whole natural world: belief in creation is a consequence of faith in alliance. The God who comes is the God who was from the beginning.

God does not act as though the past could be cast into oblivion or as though the sinner need take no responsibility. It is inescapable that humanity live out what sin has brought into the world. But God forgives, as only God can forgive, and gives a new beginning, a beginning that takes the past into account while being saved from the wreckage of good and of hope, and looks forward to the future in the promise of a redeemer who will live out, in time, humanity’s ordeal, forgiveness, and hope. This is the pattern of all divinely inspired and granted forgiveness or pardon, and shows that reconciliation allows a beginning wrought out of an errant past: an offer undeserved, an advent of mercy that is also an affirmation of life, a word from those who suffer from sin that narrates the offense as suffered, then a confession from the offender and a humble petition for pardon. The pardon itself is a gift, a life that wells up in the offended out of an abundance of mercy and love infused by the divine Spirit. In short, this reading of Genesis tells us of the need to name and locate sin in its full reality, to acknowledge it, to embark on paths that lead to redress and reconciliation, and to do so in joy and hope, however deep the darkness.

**Naming Sin**

Facing sin is not a matter of detailing and telling sins, met with the response of an act of jurisdiction, nor may the past be consigned to oblivion, however cruel it may be. Proper care has to be taken in the naming of sin and in the taking of responsibility in face of those offended. There has always been the risk that a one-sided interpretation of the power of the keys as a power to judge and to absolve means that the image of eschatological judgment loses its creative power, reducing the exercise of the keys to a merely regulating power, or to a legal and prescriptive language which replaces the creativity of the poetic.

In the past half-century, we have seen an effort on the part of the Church, for example in Council, to name sin and injustice under the light of the signs of the times, giving them also their narrative countenance within what they mean to the life of a human society. In accord with this, for the reform of society theologians and bishops speak of sinful structures, sinful not just because they now crush but because of whence they came to be, out of what story of plunder and insult and victimizing they emerged, and indeed out of what sinful thoughts. Today, the Church has to work with others in the naming of sin, in deciphering what is offensive, harmful, what needs redress. She also has to help communities or peoples seeking reconciliation among themselves to look honestly at their past, to tell their stories both of victimhood and of offense.
In looking to the past, acknowledgment of our solidarity with a Church that has inherited sinfulness woven into the story of grace is needed. This involves, as said, not only memories of wrong doings but also a recognition of how even social and ecclesiastical structures today bear the mark of past failure to uphold the image and mercy of Christ. Beyond this, we have inherited ways of thinking which could be called sinful thinking because they lead to complicity in harm done. This is brought out quite clearly, for example, in Pope John Paul’s *Letter to Women*, in June 1995:

Unfortunately we are heirs to a history which has conditioned us to a remarkable extent. In every time and place this conditioning has been an obstacle to the progress of women . . . they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude . . . if objective blame, especially in particular historical contexts, has belonged to not just a few members of the Church, for this I am truly sorry. May this regret be transformed, on the part of the whole Church, into a renewed commitment of fidelity to the Gospel vision (5–6).

Along with the story of sin, there are stories of the traces of grace—martyrs, virgin martyrs, penitents, confessors. What we need more of are the stories of victims and communion with them across the years. Sins tend to be cut off from their living context, made acts in themselves, not sufficiently seen as relational activities, actions involving persons and the harm done to persons. When the Church works with others in redressing historical wrongs and reforming social structures, it is necessary that she see her own implication and complicity. For example, in the persecution of the Jews, in the conflicts of Northern Ireland, in the apartheid regime of Southern Africa, in the injustices against indigenous peoples in Latin America, in the discrimination against women in society, Churches have played their parts. No mediator works well except in solidarity—as Christ taught us, in his solidarity with sinners, taking on sin for our sake. It is this humble confession on its own part that will enable the Church or church communities to insist that full recognition of offense is a necessary prelude to reconciliation: nothing of the past is to be cast into oblivion. Rather, the past is seen in a new light when it is found that a spark of life is engendered by the mutual readiness to forgive and to be forgiven.

**Envisioning Mercy**

In its penitential practice, the language of the Church has to be dominantly that of pardon, of gift, of life, of resurrection. Even in the past, the ministry of penance centered on the Pasch of Christ, from which the light of hope shines like the candle placed in our church buildings for Paschaltide. The Church today, in
the revision of its liturgical books, has named the sacrament of penance and reconciliation a celebration of the Paschal Mystery, closely related to eucharistic reconciliation and communion in Christ. However, ordering the celebration poses many pastoral and liturgical problems. There is some, maybe hesitant, retrieval of the paschal focus of all naming of sin, penance and reconciliation in pointing to one of the Sundays of Lent as a Sunday of Repentance for believers, who are asked to place themselves alongside catechumens and people seeking full communion in the Lord. Liturgical books likewise provide some models for services of penance and reconciliation in the season of Lent, and in Advent, when we look forward to the winter paschal feast of Christmas, the celebration of the admirabile commercium, begun in the Word's taking on of flesh. Such celebrations might well be a closer scrutiny of our failings as a Church and an expression of our hope for the coming of the Lord in whom peace and justice may come to the earth. Our failings have to do with the often unexamined life and unexamined past, the lack of hospitality to the stranger, the fear that paralyzes, the hardening of hearts towards those who have offended against the codes of conduct to which we hold, without being ready to go with Jesus to eat with publicans and sinners.

Sincerity of Inadequate Redress

It is simply not possible to offer full compensation for the unpardonable. This however does not excuse neglect of the more human aspects of justice that must still be taken seriously: what redress is needed, what changes in society required, what mediating organisms need to be encouraged, if change is to be brought about and justice realized. The Churches however in their faith in Christ must continue to witness to the overarching story of divine mercy. For both itself and for civil society, it must needs know and truly believe that it is not unreasonable, not outside divine reason, to build into structures of laws and penal codes, the divine law of the superabundance of pardon and love, weighing it in the balance against the more human and indeed just demands of equity and the redress for wrong done.

Marking the Time Between

In all of this, the mind of the disciples of Christ is focused on his remembrance. The superabundance of grace that flows out from the tree of the Cross is more compelling than an order of justice in the name of the Law and gives possibilities of retrieval, renewal, and pardon, which are beyond us. The ritual elements of reconciliation are not to be neglected. There are few, if any, situations today
that permit the celebration of final and total reconciliation, pardon given and pardon received. We are always certain in faith of God’s pardon, but though his face is turned to us in Christ we have not fully embraced the love shown, we have not fully confessed, we live too many situations in which we have not yet known communion. Any marking of reconciliation is interim and looks to the future. More than reconciliation achieved, we express its hope, its possible advent.

One concrete example may be given, namely, that of how Churches may mark remembrance of sin and division in times of hope, such as in the season of Advent or the Great Ninety Days through Lent and Paschaltide. Besides the services of penance mentioned above, we might well retrieve a table celebration that expresses our trust in God’s advent, drawing with gratitude on Jewish traditions. Sharing crust and cup is interspersed with story telling, with blessing, and with chant. In the American cultural mix, people like to gather for parties, an exchange of presents, and a collection of gifts for persons in need. In Advent this is connected with the expectation of Christmas joy. During Lent, while the hope for the light and life of the Pasch is given voice, fasting is often done with eating together, when what is shared is a Lenten meal. In Holy Week, supper meals are celebrated in advance of Easter in a way that recalls Paschal origins in the First Testament.

During such seasons, Churches might take the initiative of calling together a great mix of peoples, to express together the desire for justice and peace. Invited to sit together at table, to exchange story and remembrance, to chant their hopes and sorrows, to unite in blessings, people may already celebrate the crossing of boundaries. Within Church communion, peoples from different parishes could come together across ethnic, cultural, linguistic and economic barriers. Persons and couples estranged from the Church could be given hospitality and the right hand of fellowship. Across comunions, Christians of various confessions might well gather together to look to the advent of Christ or the hope of his Pasch and sing their unity in this expectation as they commune in bread and wine, in anticipation of a communion in the bread and wine of the Paschal meal. There is also place for an initiative to invite all Americans, immigrants and strangers, to come together within the hospitality of a meal to share the pain and the hopes of different religious traditions. The list is not exhaustive, but this may be sufficient to express the imagination of the impossible.
The more we know the terror of life on earth, the more we feel the pain of loss, the more we cringe before the memory of the past, the more we need hope. The more too we need to look beyond ourselves, to whatever or whomsoever we name the origin of life and pardon. In the confession, the sorrow, the fear, and the hope is our interim reconciliation. Those who look to Christ’s advent in the hope of justice and peace are from that inspired to seek with others what joins all in repentance, in sorrow, in the extension of hands to enemies, in the effort to live beyond the limits of our capacities, and to join together in the expectation of the impossible.

References


