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A TIMELY WITNESS

William Paul Haas
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In Tertio Millenio Adveniente (1994) Pope John Paul II proclaimed: “Hence it is appropriate that, as the Second Millenium of Christianity draws to a close, the Church should become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel and, instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the value of faith, indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly forms of counter-witness and scandal.” The universality of this exhortation extending to “all of those times in history” cannot be dismissed as one more millennial apology: it is the beginning of an endless and most serious commitment to intellectual labor.

The Pope readily identifies two reasons for this unusual initiative. First, acknowledging the weakness of the past is an act of honesty and courage “which helps us to strengthen our faith, which alerts us to face today’s temptations and challenges and prepares us to meet them.” The second reason he proposes is to promote fitting ecumenical initiatives so that, at the turn of the millennium, the fragmented Christian community might at least approach a stronger unity. John Paul II urges that the Church face the painful chapters of history when “acquiescence [was] given especially in certain centuries to intolerance and even use of violence in the service of the truth.” Thus, he continues to emphasize the need to critically examine the conduct of the Church in her most solemn obligation to bear witness to the truth, noting that mitigating circumstances do not “exonerate the

Church from the obligation to express profound regret for the weaknesses of so many of her sons and daughters who sullied her face, preventing her from fully mirroring the image of her crucified Lord, the supreme witness of patient love and humble meekness.” Sounding a note of profound historical implications which may indeed illuminate the next Christian epoch, Pope John Paul II quotes Vatican II: “The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it wins over the mind with both gentleness and power.” How different would be the history of Christianity and how much less chaotic would the condition of Christian communities be at present if this principle had been consistently embraced.

Of course, this bold and uncompromising respect for the power of the truth was not invented by this Pope. What is of great moment at this precise juncture in Christian history is that a pope finds it necessary to urge that this respect for the integrity of the truth must guide the future of Christianity. It is a most clear call to the vocation of the Christian intellectual to be more than a mere conveyor of conviction. John Henry Newman comes to mind as a particularly timely witness to the agony of the Church wrestling with her own sense of history. At the time of the first Vatican Council, Newman, along with many other scholars and bishops, seriously questioned the wisdom of the Council’s definition of papal infallibility in its timing, in its formulation and incompleteness and in the tactics of its approval. Yet, Newman trusted that in the course of historical development, notwithstanding human failings, the truth would emerge more adequately expressed. What sustained Newman through this particular test of faith was a vision of Christian history, which might anticipate the vision of John Paul II. Newman

wrote to Lord Norfolk, “As the Church is a sacred and divine creation, so in like manner her history, with its wonderful evolution of events, the throng of great actors who have a part in it, and its multiform literature, stained though its annals are with sin and error and recorded on no system, and by uninspired authors, still is a sacred work also; and those who make light of it, or distrust its lessons, incur a grave responsibility. But it is not every one that can read its pages rightly...” Certainly Newman had the indispensable qualifications for the task, faith, intelligence and discipline, by which he could unflinchingly examine the tensions between popes and councils, between popes at different times, between councils and between all disputants and the abiding convictions of the body of Christian believers. In his Apologia Pro Vita Sua Newman portrays his own historical struggle for truth as analogous to the historical struggle of the Church herself to express her faith in the context of division.

In contrast with Newman’s uncompromising challenge is the disturbingly incomplete vision of the way the Church confronts her own failures which Garry Wills proposes in his recent book Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit. One wonders why he did not bother to examine the depth of Newman’s vision of historical truth and especially why he ignored the initiatives of Pope John Paul II to face the question of the veracity of Catholic witness head on without subterfuge or reservation. In confronting the “counter-witness and scandal” throughout Christian history one must recognize beforehand that the truth can be uncovered through the collaboration of scholars who, in some instances, have been separated for centuries by anathemas, excommunications, suppressions and executions. No one party to any argument possesses all of the evidence, all of the insight or the

wisdom and courage, which the task requires. Nor should anyone expect the work to ever end, since the human historical truth can only be approximated. And finally, no one can expect to walk away from the tragedies of the past guiltless. Yet it is to the credit of the Catholic Church, unafraid of the consequences for her inner life and for the uses of others, that she has stepped forward at this precise time with a total institutional commitment - this is at least what the Pope hopes for. The malaise and uneasiness within the Catholic Church and the suspicion from external sources can only be dealt with by the honesty of the undertaking – “the truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth.” Catholics must convince themselves that it is worth trying and must be ready to deal with the suspicions of others during an initial period of testing.

Eamon Duffy, the church historian at the University of Cambridge, faults Wills for ignoring the constant struggle within the Church to remain truthful to her charge. Duffy credits Newman for his embrace of the Church in all her complexity and tension, always moving toward balance. He concludes that Newman “would have hated” Wills’ book for its distorted view of what the Church really is historically.

There have always been scholars within the Church who, with or without approval, have looked into those dark corners of history where churchmen tried to hide the intellectual and moral shortcomings of ecclesiastical leaders. But there was no clear mandate to do the work openly, so those who undertake such courageous efforts without fear of retaliation will not avoid the embarrassing discoveries. It will not be easy for many Catholic scholars who have labored in isolation from equally competent and honest

adversaries, to begin to collaborate with all intellectuals who are interested in working to reexamine the lessons of history, regardless of their denominations. “Faith has nothing to fear from the work of historical research,” the Pope affirmed, while admitting that there are “ideological, political and economic pressures” that can obscure the truth and subordinate it “to the interests of the powerful.” Eamon Duffy, who was invited to the symposium on the Inquisition hosted by the Vatican, heralded the responsibility of historians to press the Church to accept her own human fallibility. He conveyed the challenge of a Jewish colleague at the Symposium who wondered why the Church and the Pope did not say they were ashamed of past failings. Duffy makes one question whether one can grasp the truth without accepting the shame that is often attached to the truth. Regardless of who acknowledges shame, repentance or embarrassment, the more telling point is that with each effort some more of the unwelcome truth becomes exposed and with it new possibilities of a more honest life. Duffy makes the timely observation , in the midst of all the Jubilee pilgrimages to recognizable sacred places, that the Church herself is a pilgrim Church needing to check her bearings against what she has suffered by her own fault and against the terrible suffering she has sometimes caused others, including her most devoted sons and daughters, for telling her the truth which she did not want to hear.

Of many subjects that have been given serious and uncompromised public examination under the encouragement and protection of Pope John Paul II and which have a certain relevance to this time are these three: 1) The Inquisition, with all of its complexity and interlocking purposes, beginning around 1230; 2) Jan Hus, the Bohemian reformer who

was executed at the Council of Constance in 1415, and 3) Girolamo Savonarola, the Dominican reformer executed in Florence in 1498. Though these events and movements are long past and easy to dismiss as irrelevant to contemporary concerns, the internal causes of these agonizing situations warrant careful reassessment. None of the confusion of those days is beyond reappearance in more modern guises. In facing her own painful truths, the Church regains something of her credibility and capacity to teach contemporaries how to deal with the terrorizing forces of hatred and deception which continue to shape religious and secular institutions. To teach one does not have to be without fault – one has to be without deception. If in this day the Pope can openly admit to those times when the Church offered to the world “counter-witness and scandal” then it should surprise no one that many hear the Church with most profound reservations and misgivings. Wisely then does the Holy Father look to the sins of the teacher before criticizing the student’s docility.

This is not the place to examine all aspects of the Inquisition. As a Church institution it began to take shape around 1230 in different countries with very different cultures and political-religious interests. However much the Church has tried to pass off to the secular society the responsibility for the centuries of cruelty and exploitation associated with much of the inquisitorial frenzy, history refuses to separate the interlocking ecclesiastical and secular powers and personages, families and fortunes. The fact that the Church sees such entanglements as unfortunate in these days “does not exonerate the Church from the obligation to express deep regret” for accepting the convenient and profitable status quo. It is not surprising that Christians are capable of every conceivable fault: but what

requires the explicit admission of the Church are those very violations of her truth which claimed the Gospel and the Holy Spirit as their inspiration. This truth is the most difficult to uncover and to admit to; its discovery cannot be commanded, it can only be encouraged, protected and applauded.

The cases of Jan Hus and Girolamo Savonarola bring the thrust of John Paul II's exhortation into sharper personal focus. Both men were priests, attempting to serve the Church and all believers as well as they could during different periods of terrible confusion within the Church. Hus was a diocesan priest in Prague until he was burned at the stake at Constance in 1415. Savonarola was a Dominican priest in Florence where he was hanged and burned in 1498. Each saw himself as a totally committed servant of the Church, and each was intellectually astute enough to see at least something of what was destroying the credibility of the Church. Also, they could see the impending chaos in their respective times and places and they were not alone in their condemnations of abuses among Church leaders. Eventually each paid for his convictions with his life, and at the hands of those who claimed to act "in the service of the truth." Both Hus in Bohemia and Savonarola seventy five years later in Florence accepted the world as they saw it, with its split but overlapping authorities of Church and state, with the influence of wealth and family connections in religious and secular affairs and with its institutions of royalty, papacy and hierarchy, universities and monasteries. In the center of this unruly and cruel world stood the Church with its one overriding obligation to be true to the Gospels. This is precisely the issue that Pope John Paul II urges Christians to reexamine. Where, when, why and how did the witness turn into counter-witness? The study of Hus

and Savonarola is only a small prologue to the larger commitment the Pope is seeking. Therefore, it would be well to examine briefly some of implications of each of these cases, simply to understand what the Pope's exhortation implies.

Jan Hus was a professor and for a time rector of the university at Prague. He was sensitive to various reform movements around the Christian world; he was a respected professor and preacher, but he particularly antagonized the powerful German contingent in Prague. In time, the writings of John Wycliffe, the English reformer, reached him and were translated and proposed for general discussion. Many of Wycliffe's ideas of reform implied heretical notions of the Church and of the sacraments, especially of the Eucharist and Holy Orders. Hus became suspected of holding some of the same heretical opinions and was summoned to the Council of Constance to explain his position. Before going Hus sought the protection of Emperor Sigismund, just in case he needed it.

The Council of Constance had three purposes. The first was to resolve the chaos caused by the three claimants to the papacy. Each "pope" had his own retinue of cardinals, bishops, theologians and royal backers. The confusion over who was pope left the Church suffering from an ever-deepening illness that affected every aspect of her life. Eventually the Council engineered the removal of the three claimants to the papacy and established some unity of authority. The second objective of the Council was to dispose of the heretical teachings of Wycliffe and Hus – unfortunately linked together as one menace to the weakened Church. Since Wycliffe died in 1384 before the Council could deal with him personally, it ordered that his bones be dug up and thrown into a local river

in order to express its condemnation of his “attack” on the Church. Thus, Jan Hus was left to bear the full weight of hostility, especially from the Germans whom he antagonized earlier. When Hus failed to adequately defend himself or to ask for mercy, he was condemned and executed, along with one defender, in 1415.

The third goal of the Council was to institute some process of reform so that such debilitating confusion would never plague the Church again. In this regard the Council made only a feeble move toward radical and lasting reform, but it raised a very profound challenge to ecclesiastical governance that cannot be easily dismissed. The question was and is: When does a council, as fully representative of the Church as can be, assert its authority over a pope or a collection of “popes”? Where, when and how does the body of Christian believers demand anything at all from a pope and the hierarchy? The Council of Constance did not settle the matter. The simple fact is that the Council refused to yield to anyone, pope included, the authority to decide what was necessary for the healing of the Church. History lays at the feet of this council the resolution of the Great Schism, but also the murder of Jan Hus and the ineffective effort to reform.

In December 1999, Pope John Paul II expressed deep regret for the cruel death of this “renowned Bohemian preacher”, Jan Hus, and regret for the wound of “conflict and division that was imposed on the minds and hearts of the Bohemian people.” In his comments, the Pope acknowledges the unending consequences of the “counter-witness and scandal” of that time. The lessons to be learned from this episode of painful history prepare us for the unforeseen challenges in the future. History can be understood as much

more than information about the past, better seen as the ongoing formation of our understanding of how the past shapes us in shaping the future.

Like Jan Hus seventy-five years earlier, Girolamo Savonarola thought of himself as a loyal follower of Christ and son of the Church, which appeared to be crumbling about him due to corruption in the ecclesiastical and political structures and especially in the papacy. Convinced that everything was for sale, including the papacy, Savonarola dreamt that Florence could be transformed into a new Jerusalem, a purified Christian community to supplant the hopelessly corrupt Rome. The Gospel would be preached to all in their own language, virtue would be the common cause of priests and laity, the people would govern themselves and the art and architecture of the community would glorify its faith. In due course, the piously brilliant friar concluded that true peace would come to the Christian world only when a council would condemn and remove the pope, Alexander VI, whom Savonarola saw as a vile pagan, devoid of all goodness including faith in God.

Savonarola made it easier for his enemies to destroy him by his immoderate disregard of all points of view but his own, by the claim of divine inspiration and by the refusal to settle for pragmatic and modest progress toward reform. Thus, he gave Alexander VI the perfect excuse to have him executed and defamed. Luther saw Savonarola as a saint, as did many of the friar's confreres and followers, but the majority of the people turned against him for failing to deliver on the promises of prestige and prosperity. It is only now, five-hundred years later, that the Church he loved and died for cares to look

squarely at the chaos that enveloped him and the Church herself. A feeble movement for the canonization of Savonarola has begun, but the prospects are questionable and perhaps irrelevant to the larger historical truth at stake, namely, that circumstances do not mitigate the Church's responsibility for the catastrophes caused in her name.

The tragedies of Jan Hus and Girolamo Savonarola were more tragedies for the Church at large than for these individuals and their followers, and no mere gestures of regret or apology will heal the wounds of blindness and injustice. Pope John Paul II points in the right direction with the proclamation, "Faith has nothing to fear from the work of historical research." Speaking to the scholars studying the life and work of Jan Hus in 1999, the Pope noted that historical research is directed toward "the truth that has in God its source." Yet, the Pope holds no illusions that the historical truth is easy to come by since ideological, economic, political and personal convictions can often obscure and subvert the truth. "Yet this does not mean that we cannot offer an account of history that is in a very real sense impartial and therefore true and liberating."

Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, addressing the Symposium on the Inquisition, reflects the same courageous expectations and admits that the history of this subject is "replete with errors, inconsistencies, and offenses against charity." He pointed out that the Church asked nothing of historians but to examine the inquisition carefully, rigorously and freely, stating "The Church does not fear passing under the judgment of historians." Of course, historians, Catholic and non-Catholic, have formed judgments of the Church for centuries, but now the Church is urging, inviting and stimulating such rigorous scrutiny.

This new openness entails several moral obligations for the Church and for others. First, the Catholic Church cannot, without calling into question her own credibility turn back from the course she has so publicly embraced under the urging of John Paul II. That means that records must be made available, old definitions of scandal and propriety must be revised, intellectual freedom must be deeply understood and the right to speak and publish must be defended. Secondly, all other parties of interest in the truth must be made welcome to this ongoing inquiry. Since most of the truth in question involves other Churches, other religions, other cultures and persons outside the control of ecclesiastical authorities, their portions of the truth, preserved only in their recollections, must be shared with respect. Lastly, the sharing and interpretation of history leads inevitably to differences, disagreements and even new animosities, all of which need to be faced courageously and constructively.

Public access to the truth will present its own set of new challenges since technology allows for much greater access to information and for many opportunities to manipulate and fragment the truth of history. Though he did not identify this precisely, John Paul II seems to be aware of the danger that the truth so passionately sought can still be obscured and subverted by all the powers of untruth. But, he seems resolute in its pursuit because there is no other way to heal the wounds of division and hatred caused by historical error and the deliberate suppression of the truth. The responsibility of the Church is to convince her sons and daughters, and then all concerned women and men, that she is indeed thoroughly committed to “recalling all those times in history when they departed

from the spirit of Christ... in ways of thinking and acting which were truly forms of counter-witness and scandal,” - a most appropriate witness from the successor of St. Peter. To the extent that this witness to imperfect witness is heeded, the intellectual life of the Christian community, and therefore its spiritual life, will be profoundly changed and invigorated.