

COLUMNISTS

Only the dead could offer forgiveness

It was front page news in *The New York Times* (10/1/97) when the Roman Catholic Church in France officially apologized to the Jewish people for its silence in the face of French collaboration with the Holocaust during the Second World War.

The statement also received extensive coverage in France itself.

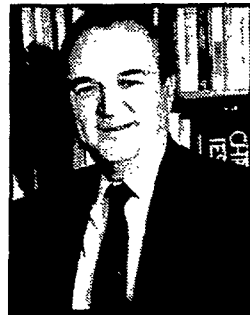
The apology was offered by Archbishop Olivier de Berranger of St. Denis in the Paris suburb of Drancy, from which tens of thousands of French Jews were deported to Nazi death camps (most to Auschwitz), with the compliance of the Vichy government.

The ceremony took place in a small square between a railroad freight car and a monument commemorating the 76,000 Jews who were deported from that very place. (The monument refers to Drancy as "the antechamber of the death camps.")

Among the hundreds in attendance were the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris, Jean Marie Lustiger, himself a Jew by birth, and the Chief Rabbi of France, Joseph Sitruk.

The church's apology came on the 57th anniversary of the promulgation of the first of more than 160 anti-Semitic laws and decrees passed by the Vichy regime.

The fact, and not only the content, of the apology is remarkable because, until just two years ago, not even the French



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

Republic accepted responsibility for what the Vichy government had done, insisting always on a sharp distinction between the two entities.

It was a view strongly defended by the late president of France, Francois Mitterand, who had himself worked for 18 months as an official of the Vichy government.

To his great credit, Mitterand's successor, President Jacques Chirac, openly acknowledged two years ago that the French state itself had "committed the irreparable" against the Jews.

The initial reaction to the church's apology on the part of the Jewish community in France has been generally positive.

The president of the council of Jewish institutions in France referred to it as "a major turning point," marking the end of a long period of silence during the war and after, and the president of the Sons and Daughters of Deported French

Jews expressed the hope that the statement would now put pressure on the Vatican to make public soon its own planned declaration on the Holocaust.

While the church's apology surely merits all the attention and much of the praise it has received, one is struck nonetheless by the fact that it is only a statement, and one that has been so painfully long in coming.

Measured against the horrors of the Holocaust itself, as well as the scandal of the church's silence and its actual complicity in these monstrous crimes against the Jews, the statement seems a somewhat less momentous and courageous act.

It is true that some leaders of the French church were outspoken critics of the Vichy government and of the Nazi occupiers, and that their opposition may have helped to save three-quarters of France's Jewish population from imprisonment and eventual death.

But in the face of the unspeakable obscenity of the Holocaust, too many Christians, both clerical and lay, not only in France but all across Europe and in the United States, behaved in a manner, by commission and omission alike, that brought lasting shame upon the church.

The only ones today who would have the right to offer the church human forgiveness are dead. They are the six million who did not survive the death

camps, who were gassed and incinerated like diseased animals.

The only human dignity they had left was the dignity which they themselves maintained, in the face of the murderous behavior of the Nazis and of those who did their bidding.

To be sure, the apology does acknowledge much: the loyalism and docility of "the vast majority of church officials," which went "far beyond traditional obedience to established powers"; "the constantly repeated anti-Jewish stereotypes wrongly perpetuated among Christians in the historical process that led to the Holocaust"; and the silence of the multitudes when legislation was passed and decrees were issued against the Jews, leading eventually to their imprisonment and execution.

"Today we confess that silence was a mistake," the official apology reads. In English the word "mistake" is appallingly weak, but, as the *Times* points out, the French word "faute" has "a particularly solemn resonance in France," having been used previously by President Chirac in confessing the "irreparable" wrong committed by the French state itself.

As the church of France begs God's forgiveness and asks the Jewish people to hear its words of repentance, the rest of the church can surely do no less.

...
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St. Thérèse let God work through her

Given the circumlocutions common in this pontifical city, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger may have been a bit taken aback when I asked him, bluntly, "So why is St. Thérèse of Lisieux a doctor of the church?" His Eminence laughed — as he often does, caricatures notwithstanding — and then had many provocative things to say on the subject, which has aroused controversy in the run-up to the people's Oct. 19 solemn declaration on the matter.

The first thing to understand, the cardinal said, is that there have always been different forms of "doctors of the church." Great patristic doctors like Gregory and Augustine, Athanasius and John Chrysostom developed their doctrine in their teaching role as bishops. The scholastic doctors, like Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas, were primarily university professors and writers. St. Ephraim the Syrian, on the other hand, was a doctor of the church whose contributions to theology were worked out in his hymns, in music.

Now we have new forms of doctors and it's important to lift up the rich diversity of ways of teaching in the church. We have, the cardinal explained, St. Theresa of Avila, whose theology was mediated through mystical experience.



the catholic difference

By GEORGE WEIGEL

We have St. Catherine of Siena, whose theology was experiential. And now we have the Little Flower, who articulated a different kind of theology of human experience.

In our scientific culture, the cardinal continued, it has been terribly important to have "the message of a simple and deep experience of God and a teaching about the simplicity of being a saint." Given the extreme action-orientation of our times, it's crucial to see that to be a saint is not necessarily a matter of great actions, but of letting the Lord work us in.

Cardinal Ratzinger also suggested that St. Thérèse was an important figure for ecumenism. Luther's doctrine of justification, the font of the Reformation, was provoked by the difficulties he had in un-

derstanding himself to be justified and redeemed amid the complex, encrusted structures of the medieval church — through which, unhappily, "grace did not arrive in his soul." We should understand "the explosion" of Luther's doctrine of justification by "faith alone" in this context: His discovery that he only had to have confidence in the Lord, that he had only to give himself over entirely into the hands of the Lord, to know in his soul that he had been saved.

This doctrine "returned, in a very Catholic way, in Thérèse of Lisieux," who understood that one doesn't have to make or do great things; one only has to "give (oneself) into the hands of Jesus," to be overwhelmed by God's grace and mercy. This, the cardinal insisted, was "a real interpretation of what it means to be redeemed."

To know ourselves to be spiritually poor and to give ourselves confidently to God in the knowledge of that poverty — this gives us the freedom to follow the Lord and live a Christian life.

Thérèse's "little way" is thus an important contribution to the common ecumenical question, "How can I be redeemed, how am I justified?" Why? Because the "little way" is a "very deep

rediscovering of the center of Christian life."

Thérèse is also a doctor of the church because she taught that from the cloister, far from the world, one can do much for the world. To be in communion with Christ is to be present to Christians all over the world. Thus everybody can "be efficient for the universal church in this way" — through an intense communion with Christ. Why? Because the heart of the church is present in all the parts of the body. This is also an important corrective to the idea that to be an "efficient" church, a church truly about the Father's business, is to be understood primarily in pragmatic terms.

Finally, Thérèse embodied a new understanding of the relationship between time and eternity: to be in Christ and to do good on earth is my heaven, she taught. Eternity is present in time, and living for eternity is living in and for the time that has been given to us.

St. Thérèse as doctor of the church is thus not a matter of pious sentimentality. It is a matter of rediscovering the evangelical heart of Christianity.

...
Weigel is a senior fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.

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Kids' Chronicle

Answer:

from page 12

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name."



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