

Symposium tackles historical truths — and 'myths'

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

On the final day of an unprecedented Vatican symposium on the Inquisition, Pope John Paul II thanked historians for shedding light on a "tormented" chapter of church history and confirmed plans for a "mea culpa" statement in the year 2000.

Without offering his own judgment on the Inquisition, the pope said the Inquisition's actions require a moral evaluation by church leaders today.

He said the Vatican invited some 50 historians and other experts to the Oct. 29-31 symposium because the church needs objective, detailed information on a topic that is often clouded by emotion.

He said the church ultimately wants to make a theological appraisal of the Inquisition, and it "certainly cannot consider making an ethical judgment like the request for forgiveness without first being accurately informed about the situation of that time."

"But neither can it rely on images of the past that are circulated by public opinion, since these images are often overloaded with a passionate emotionalism that prevents a calm and objective diagnosis," he said.

The pope said the Vatican had convened the experts to help lay a factual foundation about the Inquisition — its activities, its

methods and its mentality as seen in historical context. Now the church can ponder the results, and examine how "methods of intolerance and even violence in the service of the truth" fell short of the Gospel, the pope said.

"The problem of the Inquisition belongs to a tormented phase of church history, upon which I have invited Christians to reflect with sincerity," he said.

The pope is scheduled to pronounce a "request for forgiveness" on Ash Wednesday in the year 2000, a statement expected to address the Inquisition and other dark periods in the church's history.

From the beginning of the symposium, it was clear that the Vatican expected the encounter not only to document church misdeeds but to help remove what it considers exaggerations and even "myths" in the public perception of the Inquisition.

Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, who heads a Vatican planning committee for the millennial jubilee, opened the meeting by announcing that the church "is not afraid of submitting its own past to the judgment of historians." He said that while legitimate distinctions of responsibility may be drawn regarding the various forms taken by the Inquisition, it was essentially a single institution of an ecclesial nature.

Swiss Dominican Father Georges Cottier, the papal theologian who helped organize the encounter, said the church's ex-

amination of conscience was part of what the pope has called a "purification of memory." This will allow the church to admit past mistakes and face the new millennium freed from the burden of "paralyzing spiritual trauma," the theologian said.

But, he added, by clarifying the historical record on the Inquisition, the symposium could also help free the collective memory from "distortions," discarding unfounded criticisms and "eliminating myths."

A similar tone was struck by a background paper released by the Vatican on the eve of the symposium, in which one of the Vatican participants, Agostino Borromeo, described the historical context as a mitigating factor in the judgment on church tribunals. For example, he said, when the use of torture by inquisitorial tribunals was approved in 1252 by Pope Innocent IV, it was already in use in civil courts. Moreover, he said, the pope stipulated that torture in church tribunals must not result in physical mutilation or endanger the life of the defendant.

Overall, Borromeo said, modern experts agree that defendants facing church inquisitors had fairer treatment than in most civil court systems of their day. He also said the death toll from the Inquisition was smaller than popularly thought; in several periods, the numbers of supposed heretics who were executed totaled less than 3 percent of those tried.

One symposium participant, who asked not to be named, said that despite the Vatican's interest in deflating some of the "black legend" aspects of the Inquisition, the symposium was honest and open in addressing the facts. He said there was no attempt to "whitewash" the past.

William Monter, a historian from Northwestern University who participated in the encounter, said the Vatican's theologians and experts wanted to "listen and learn from us." After the meeting ended, he said it was clear that "the Vatican feels the need to acknowledge a degree of its responsibility for the errors" of the Inquisition.

He said the symposium "spent a lot of time drawing distinctions," as was proper for any historical conference. For example, he said, there were different levels of papal and Vatican control over the three basic forms taken by the Inquisition through the centuries: the early tribunals established by the pope, which spread throughout Europe; the infamous Spanish Inquisition, over which the pope had much less control; and the Roman Inquisition that operated "in the pope's backyard."

The symposium's sponsors highlighted the fact that participants were chosen with no regard to nationality, religion or ideological orientation. The Vatican said the symposium's results would be published sometime soon, but did not give a date.

Inquisition

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such as the Third Lateran Council (1179).

In 1231, Pope Gregory IX issued Excommunicamus, to help organize the separate investigations. This document marks the beginning of the formal Papal Inquisition. In the document, Pope Gregory required that repentant heretics be sentenced to life imprisonment, and that unrepentant ones be put to death by the secular government. The tribunal network spread through parts of Europe, and inquisitors were recruited from Dominicans and Franciscans.

The inquisitor often arrived in a village offering a grace period in which sinners and "heretics" could gain leniency by confessing their transgressions — such as missing Mass, or speaking against church authorities — and naming other suspects. After this period, the inquisitor could bring charges against anyone, based even on public rumor, and the accused did not know who his accusers were. Those who persisted in denying heresy could be im-

prisoned. Torture was introduced by papal decree in 1252 as another standard method to extract confessions.

Inquisition tribunals handed out fines; penances such as pilgrimages, the wearing of yellow crosses and floggings; and prison sentences, but the church could not carry out the death penalty. That was done by civil courts, acting at the church's behest.

Historians note that compared to the number of people investigated, the percentage of people sentenced to death was small — during his career as a prominent inquisitor in Southern France from 1307-24, Bernard Gui, for example, only turned over for execution 40 of the 930 people he sentenced. Nevertheless, thousands of people were burned to death publicly over the span of the Inquisition.

Even by the early 1300s, the abuses of the Inquisition prompted a papal inquiry into the tribunals, which were curbed but continued to function in many places. The inquisitorial fervor gradually declined in many areas simply because the investigators began to run out of suspects. However, as national governments grew,

they began taking over control of the local inquisitions, often to promote political ends.

Such was the case in Spain. "The Spanish Inquisition was an organ of the Spanish government, not even under the direct authority of the pope," Thibodeau explained.

The Spanish government under King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella used it as a device to target converted Jews and Muslims in the late 1400s. Under Dominican Tomas de Torquemada, an estimated 2,000 individuals were burned at the stake. The papacy protested the excesses, but the Inquisition in Spain lingered until 1834 when it was finally abolished.

The Roman Inquisition resurfaced early in the 16th century in response to the growth of Protestantism. Pope Paul III in 1542 created the Congregation of the Holy Roman and Universal Inquisition — later called the Holy Office. This office focused on ensuring intellectual and theological orthodoxy. It was through this office, for example, that Galileo was tried and condemned in 1633. Meanwhile, in conjunction with these efforts, an Index

of Forbidden Books was created in 1557. The Holy Office remains today, its name changed to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1965. The Index was abolished in 1966.

Historians note that while the Inquisition in its heyday did result in thousands of individuals being tortured and killed, it must nevertheless be judged in part in light of the times in which it was situated.

During the Protestant Reformation, for example, Catholics were subject to inquisitorial trials and executions. Thibodeau cited the case of England.

"After the Reformation, it was a crime to be a Roman Catholic or a Puritan in England under Elizabeth the First," he noted.

Indeed, it is estimated that between 1534 and 1685, some 600 Catholics were executed in England because of their faith.

Meanwhile, the witch trials of the 16th and 17th centuries — conducted with equal fervor by Protestants and Catholics — resulted in thousands of deaths.

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