

# Pope issues plea for forgiveness

By John Thavis  
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II made an unprecedented apology for the sins of Christians through the ages, culminating the church's "examination of conscience" for the jubilee year.

The pope's long-awaited "mea culpa" March 12 was echoed by local churches in the United States and elsewhere, and generally welcomed by non-Catholics around the world.

The pope's idea of a day of atonement, which met some resistance even inside the Vatican, was designed to acknowledge shortcomings in the church's past, in order to give Catholics a sense of reconcili-

ation and make future evangelization more credible.

"We forgive and we ask forgiveness!" the pope said during a historic Lenten liturgy in St. Peter's Basilica. He and seven top Vatican officials pronounced a "request for pardon" for sins against Christian unity, the use of violence in serving the truth, hostility toward Jews and other religions, the marginalization of women, and wrongs — like abortion — against society's weakest members.

The pope said the church has had many saints, but some of its members have shown disobedience to God and inconsistency with the faith — in the past and present.

"For the part that each of us, with his

behavior, has had in these evils that have disfigured the face of the church, we humbly ask forgiveness," he said.

Pronouncing the apology for Christian intolerance in the past was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which was created more than 450 years ago under a different name to run the Inquisition.

"Even men of the church, in the name of faith and morals, have sometimes used methods not in keeping with the Gospel in the solemn duty of defending the truth," the cardinal said.

Other Vatican officials expressed regret for actions by Christians that have ag-

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Reuters/CNS  
Pope John Paul II embraces the crucifix during a liturgy in which he asked forgiveness for past and present sins of Christians.

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## Will Irish peace process survive?

On Good Friday 1997, Northern Ireland's political parties, along with the Irish and British governments, put the past 30 years of civil strife behind them, signing an agreement that paved the way to a new power-sharing government. As Good Friday 2000 approaches, however, the question is whether Northern Ireland will continue to be crucified by the past.

The power-sharing government has been suspended over the issue of when — and if — the Provisional Irish Republican Army plans to disarm. Once again, Northern Ireland is being ruled directly from Britain.

The current crisis in Northern Ireland may lead some Irish republican hardliners to lose faith in the peace process, according to Father Sean McManus, CSSR, president of the Washington D.C.-based Irish National Caucus, an organization that promotes civil rights in Northern Ireland.

"Just when people like myself had taken a big, big sigh of relief... the British government destroys everything in an enormously bad decision," Father McManus said in a phone interview.

### Roots, reconciliation

Northern Ireland comprises six British-ruled counties that were partitioned from the rest of Ireland following Ireland's War of Independence in the early 1920s. The rest of Ireland eventually became a republic. For various historical reasons, most Catholics in the 20th century favored Irish independence and most Protestants opposed it, although members of each religious tradition



Reuters/CNS

A photo of an Irish Republican Army member aiming a rifle was featured on the cover of a 1999 IRA calendar. The calendar, which was sold in hard-line nationalist areas of Northern Ireland, caused controversy with unionists who saw it as an indication of the IRA's reluctance to decommission weapons.

have dissented from the majority position.

After partition, Catholics in the North often were repressed by pro-British Protestants who viewed them as disloyal to the British crown. The discrimination sparked a civil rights movement in the 1960s that eventually gave way to violent sectarian strife after the region's authorities attempted to destroy the movement by force. Convinced their rights would only be secure in a united Ireland, many Catholics — and even a few Protestants — supported nonviolent and/or violent attempts to end British rule in the ensuing years.

The Good Friday Agreement, therefore, was a major breakthrough because all par-

ties — including those dedicated to Irish unity — agreed that the North would only be reunited with the southern Republic of Ireland if the majority of Northern Ireland's citizens wanted it so. Currently, Northern Ireland has a slight pro-British majority of 55-60 percent of its people, although some demographers project that Catholics will dominate the province by the mid-21st century.

The majority of people in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland voted for the U.S.-brokered Good Friday Agreement, which also established cross-border governmental bodies.

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