

# COLUMNISTS

## Opinions differ on papal apology

Two extreme views of Pope John Paul II have coexisted in the Catholic Church for the past 20 years. On the one side, is a fiercely partisan belief that he is among the outstanding popes in history, deserving in his lifetime of the honorary title, "the Great." Others go a step further and speak of him in saintly terms.

The opposite camp views this pontificate as nothing less than a "disaster." John Paul II is portrayed as a thoroughly reactionary pope: dictatorial in governing style, intolerant of opinions different from his own, oppressive in his attitude toward women.

As the medieval Scholastics reminded us, the truth, like virtue, lies somewhere in the middle. A good illustration of this principle is the pope's recent apology for the sins of the church.

John Paul II is the only pope in history to have offered a public apology for sins committed by the church against a variety of groups and, at the same time, to have extended the hand of forgiveness to those who have sinned against the church. These were acts of extraordinary sensitivity and courage.

The closest the Catholic Church previously came to a confession of its sins was in the Second Vatican Council's admission that "people on both sides were



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

to blame" for the divisions in the church created by the East-West Schism and the Protestant Reformation (Decree on Ecu- menism, n. 3).

The council also acknowledged that the church is "at once holy and always in need of purification" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 8), but without offering any specific examples.

The pope included in his apology and the intercessory prayers that followed references to "the divisions between Christians," "the use of violence that some have resorted to in the service of truth," and "the acts of dissidence and of hostility sometimes taken towards followers of other religions." He also mentioned "violations of the right to life," "indifference towards the poverty of many countries," "the behavior of those who

in the course of history have caused [Jews] to suffer," and "attitudes of rejection and exclusion" toward women.

Those inclined to view the apology as a bottle half empty rather than half full, fault it for its lack of specificity. They ask why the apology did not mention the Crusades by name and the terrible sins they perpetrated against Muslims, Jews and Orthodox Christians, or the sins of torture and execution which the Inquisition perpetrated against creative thinkers, reformers, Jews and Muslims.

Why did the pope not apologize explicitly for the missionaries' forced conversions of native peoples in Latin America and Africa, and for the contempt they displayed toward their indigenous cultures? And why no mention of the Holocaust and of the silence of Pope Pius XII?

In the pope's defense, one must recall that many of his closest advisers, including some cardinals, were strongly opposed to public apologies of any kind. The church is "without spot or wrinkle...holy and without blemish" (Eph 5:27), they argued. How can it admit sin?

The pope and the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith have tried to address the principal concern by distinguishing between the church "as such" and its "sons and daughters."

Their argument is that sin can only be imputed to individual members of the church. The church itself is beyond moral indictment because it is a mystery, the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit.

For many, this is a distinction without a difference. The sins, after all, were not committed by renegade Catholics acting entirely on their own. The Crusades, for example, were papally organized and sponsored, and so was the Inquisition.

Another line of defense is that the sins in question were contrary to the teachings of the church. Had church members followed those teachings, the sins would not have been committed in the first place.

This, too, requires a long stretch of credulity. The Inquisition and various manifestations of anti-Semitism were, unfortunately, rooted in contemporary church teachings, however erroneous (and embarrassing) they are regarded by today's doctrinal standards.

On balance, however, the papal apology was an exceedingly positive development, one that the church "as such" can effectively build upon.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

## Do others see Jesus in us?

Fifth Sunday of Lent (April 9): (R3) John 12:20-33. (R1) Jeremiah 31:31-34. (R2) Hebrews 5:7-9.

Some Greeks attending the festival of the Passover came to Philip and said to him, "Sir, we should like to see Jesus." Isn't that the universal need of mankind? "We should like to see Jesus." We all need Jesus for life. We need Jesus to give meaning to our existence. We need Jesus to forgive us our sins. Where, then, can we see Jesus?

First we can see him in historical records, like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Yet these are not complete. For instance, they do not tell us what Jesus really looked like. I imagine he was strong and swarthy. Who could bear the cross to Calvary after the beating Jesus suffered were he not strong?

Because the historical record is so limited, we have a tendency to see Jesus according to our own needs. In the book, *Jesus CEO*, the author sees Jesus as an executive, a salesperson, a hippie, a firebrand radical, a black man, a blue-eyed blond and every other way imaginable.

A surprise to us may be that we can see Jesus in the lives of persons in need. "What you do to the least, you do to me," Jesus said. In a word, Jesus is in the least



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

of his children.

People are all around us. So many are like persons lost at sea without an inflated raft. Some are floating. Others are beginning to sink. Where are the rescue teams?

Believe it or not, you and I are meant to be God's rescue team. Multitudes of people need to be rescued. Families are coming apart. Teenagers are losing themselves in drugs and suicides. Other have no real job. Many of them have children who will be going without the necessities of life. Many of these children will turn to crime. Do we see Jesus in them? Sure, go to church. One of the reasons why we go to church is to sensitize ourselves so that we can see Jesus in others.

A few years ago the New York Fire Department had a great parade. One feature was three buses loaded with people from all walks of life, the high and the low. The signs on these buses read: "All of these people were saved by our fire department from burning buildings." Wouldn't it be wonderful if we, on Judgment Day, could point out countless people to God, and be able to say, "All these we saved from hell by our word, assistance, and example?"

Finally, we see Jesus in those who are his disciples. You have heard it said that "You are the only Bible some people will ever read." We could also say, "You are the only Jesus some people will ever meet." We are the keyhole through which other folk see God.

"One of the bitterest moments of my life," said a missionary, "was when an earnest young Buddhist boy said to me, 'I want to believe in Christ, but I have never seen him in those who profess him. How can I believe in someone whom I have not seen?'"

A premed student at the University of California, Berkeley, became a Christian after a long journey through doubts and questions. What had tipped the scales were the actions of a Catholic classmate.

The premed student had been very ill with the flu and, as a result, had missed 10 days of school. "Without any fanfare or complaints," his Catholic classmate collected all his class assignments and took time away from his own studies to help him catch up. When he discovered why he had done this, he asked to go to church with him and ended up Catholic.

Can others see Jesus in us?

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

### Daily Readings

**Monday, April 10**  
Daniel 13:1-9, 15-17, 19-30, 33-62  
or 13:41-62; John 8:1-11

**Tuesday, April 11**  
Numbers 21:4-9; John 8:21-30.

**Wednesday, April 12**  
Daniel 3:14-20, 91-92, 95; John 8:31-42

**Thursday, April 13**  
Genesis 17:3-9; John 8:51-59

**Friday, April 14**  
Jeremiah 20:10-13; John 10:31-42

**Saturday, April 15**  
Ezekiel 37:21-28; John 11:45-56

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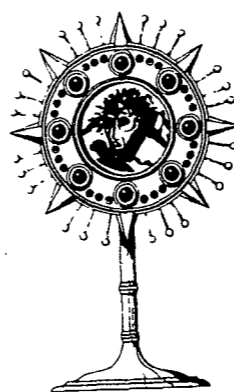
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