

A Paradigm of Atonement for the “Sins Born Within the Church”*

Last year, as I pondered the egregious betrayals on the part of priests, religious, and ministers of the Roman Catholic Church, I realized that those abuses had gone on for decades reaching all the way to Rome. So, I wrote to the Pope on April 29, proposing that he declare A Year of Atonement.

The timing of my proposal, I thought, was especially propitious, because the Year of the Priest was coming to a close, a year in which the Pope had emphasized for all the priests throughout the world the essence of the priest’s vocation as an *alter Christus*, another Christ, or as it is said today, one who stands in the person of Christ. When the year began, the Pope asked of every priest, and these are his words, “a generous and renewed commitment to the ideal of complete self-oblation to Christ and the Church. ... This faith needs to come alive in each one of us.”

Clearly, the Pope’s statement of that priestly ideal underscores the gravity of the scandals.

But instead of the Vatican continuing to defend the endless accusations against individuals, as well as against the Church Herself in its handling of the scandal, it seemed to me what was called for is atonement for the sins of those who have abused their sacred offices—an atonement in which all members of the Church would participate, under the leadership of the Pope.

I sent copies of my e-mail to the Pope to a number of people whom I thought would be interested, and I received positive and encouraging responses from as far away as South Africa.

A Franciscan priest, scholar, and educator wrote, "I think the idea of A Year of Atonement is excellent and inspired." He went on to express his own willingness to atone, and to encourage his confreres, to participate in such atonement. He said, "I encourage all our efforts to repent of these sins wholly and completely."

A Discalced Carmelite priest, scholar, administrator, and member of a United Nations Committee, wrote, "Lovely and pertinent thought. The reasons for thinking of such a period of atonement surely abound."

A professor of philosophy and theology, a convert to Catholicism and former Dominican priest, and the recipient of a prestigious John Templeton grant, wrote, "Well done! I am always glad when 'ordinary' people have the courage to come forward. I am concerned with the faults of the institution that people take for granted. The hushing up of the scandal is a sinister sign of an all too familiar attitude in the Church which is in dire need of the kind of reformation you are calling for."

A Catholic university educator/administrator, and officer in a worldwide Catholic organization wrote, "I agree, the Church needs a year of atonement and some type of fasting and/or mortification for all. As I pray for the Holy Father, I think your concept could work."

A non-Catholic university scholar, a widely published author, and an authority on Early Christian and Medieval culture and art, wrote, "Your idea of a year of atonement is a valuable suggestion. Unfortunately, the forces of inertia in the Church still seem to be playing a role."

On May 11th, on his trip to Portugal, just 11 days after my e-mail, Benedict announced a new approach to the problem. He said, "...the greatest persecution of the Church...is born from within the Church. And the Church, therefore, has the profound need to learn penance again, to accept purification...as well as the need for justice."

The following day, I received an e-mail from a correspondent, who wrote, "I am heartened! You have been heard. Yesterday Benedict said the Church needed to relearn penance and to recognize the necessity of justice. It's a start."

And that's exactly what it's turned out to be, a start.

Two days later, on May 13th, speaking of himself in the third person, the Pope said, "as the Successor of Peter, the humble Vicar of Christ on Earth...the Pope needs to open himself ever more fully to the mystery of the Cross, embracing it as the one hope and the supreme way to gain and to gather in to the Crucified One all his brothers and sisters in humanity."

Over the past year, individual bishops and priests, not an overwhelming number, however, apparently influenced by the Pope's position set aside periods of atonement in their dioceses and parishes. The bishops in Yorkshire, England and, the bishop of Brooklyn, come to mind.

One of the most remarkable responses to my proposal, however, came from the pastor of Holy Innocents parish here in New York City, Father Thomas Kallumady. With the blessing of his archbishop, Timothy Dolan, he conducted a novena of Masses from October 10 to December 5 in atonement for "the sins born within the Church." During the nine weeks his parishioners also made an estimated 314,196 personal acts of reparation for that intention, a list of which Father Kallumady submitted to the Pope with a copy to Archbishop Dolan.

That astonishing response, of course, was based upon the parishioners' belief that a person can, in fact, gain forgiveness for another person's transgressions. That's because as Catholics they believe they are all interconnected by God's love in what theologians call a Mystical Body. Each person's acts, then, affect the spiritual lives of all the others. Virtuous acts beget a healthy body. Sinful acts detract from it.

In our symposium last year on the relationship between science and faith, we saw that the noted metaphysician, Father Norris Clarke, had spent a lifetime exploring what he called the extraordinary interconnectedness of all things in our material and personal universe. To illustrate man's place in that interconnectedness, Father Clarke recalled the English nobel-prize winner, Paul Dirac's comment, "Pick a flower on Earth, and you move the farthest star." The interconnectedness of the Mystical Body Father Clarke would see as a transcendent parallel to the interconnectedness of the physical universe.

Father Kallumady, noting in his covering letter to the Pope the overwhelming response of his parishioners, encouraged the Pope to implement the program of atonement worldwide. He also

asked Archbishop Dolan to extend the program to every parish in his Archdiocese. To date, neither has accepted the challenge.

In gatherings at different places and times over the past year, the Pope himself and his delegates have met with victims of abuse, their families, and supporters, and expressed the need of penance. And the Pope has expressed his own personal sorrow at the violations of his priests and ministers.

All those efforts, however, seem to me to have been but half measures.

But last month I noticed a shift in the papal approach to the scandals. It took place on February 20th, in Dublin, Ireland.

Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, accompanied by Cardinal Sean O'Malley, the apostolic delegate from Boston, conducted a Liturgy of Lament and Repentance. It was attended by 1,000 victims of sexual abuse and their families and supporters.

The Archbishop said, "I, as archbishop of Dublin and as Diarmuid Martin, stand here and I ask forgiveness of God and I ask for the first steps of forgiveness from all of the survivors of abuse."

And Cardinal O'Malley told the congregation, "On behalf of the Holy Father, I ask forgiveness for the sexual abuse of children perpetrated by priests and past failures of the church's hierarchy, here and in Rome, the failure to respond appropriately to the problem of sexual abuse."

He went on to say, "Public atoning for the church's failures is an important element of asking the forgiveness of those who have been harmed by priests and bishops, whose actions—and inactions—gravely harmed the lives of children entrusted to their care."

The service began with the two prelates lying prostrate in solemn repentance before a silent congregation. Archbishop Martin and Cardinal O'Malley then washed the feet of eight of the survivors as a sign of humility.

Cardinal O'Malley told the Catholic News Service he hoped his "presence would underline just how seriously the Holy Father is taking the need for healing and renewal in Ireland."

There were protestors at the assembly. For them, Cardinal O'Malley's words could have been interpreted to mean that this problem is serious enough that the Pope sends someone to represent him, but not serious enough that he should come himself.

If that's true, then that protest leaves little doubt that this problem must be addressed by the Pope himself and universally.

It seems obvious that the Pope cannot delegate his symbolic role as the Vicar of Christ on Earth. He can, however, concelebrate it.

What if the Pope himself were to concelebrate a liturgy of atonement with his entire constituency of bishops throughout the world? What if the Pope himself were to lay prostrate in solemn

penance before the tabernacle at St. Peter's in Rome, in a silence surpassing all words, while all of his bishops throughout the world, in like manner, at exactly the same moment, prostrate themselves in solemn penance before the tabernacles of their cathedrals, acting in unison with the Pope, who would lead them in a liturgy of atonement?

What if the Pope himself with all of his bishops throughout the world, were to wash the feet of victims, recalling Christ's action with his disciples only hours before going to the Cross and dying for mankind?

There would be little doubt, then, of the Pope's seriousness. His words of last year would finally ring true those words he spoke of himself in the third person: "as the Successor of Peter, the humble Vicar of Christ on Earth...the Pope needs to open himself ever more fully to the mystery of the Cross, embracing it as the one hope and the supreme way to gain and to gather in to the Crucified One all his brothers and sisters in humanity."

Is there a priest in the world who would not be inspired with renewed piety to atone with the Pope, fulfilling his vocation as an *alter Christus* with the Pope? The young priests full of hope, the many faithful priests, who for years have labored selflessly in the vineyard, those disillusioned few, whose fervor at ordination, would be rekindled, as well as the countless dedicated religious in the convents, monasteries, and institutions throughout the world. How inspiring—and unifying, too—would be a year of atonement for all those faithful parishioners in the pews—worldwide.

It would be essential that the Pope himself personally and formally launch the year of atonement, explaining its purpose, scope, and significance. The event would be broadcast and telecast worldwide, to men and women of all continents and nationalities, to every parish, convent, monastery, and Catholic institution, no matter how remote. The entire body of the Church, throughout the world, then, would be united with the Pope in hearing his message—at the very moment he delivered it.

His address would be followed up by involving all members of the Church in private and public devotions of prayer and reparation. That involvement would extend to programs of caring for the material and spiritual needs of one's neighbor regardless of creed or belief in that extraordinary interconnectedness that unites all members of the human family, as Father Clarke had noted.

These efforts would be supported by lay and religious instruction designed to examine the meaning and significance of atonement: the reconciliation of God and man through the suffering and death of His Son. We are taught, thereby, while shunning sin, to have compassion for the sinner, what Christ called the second greatest commandment—that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, which is like the first and greatest? “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind.” (*Matthew 22:36*)

In other words, the love of God and neighbor is the foundation of atonement.

If the Pope would lead his disciples of Christ throughout the world in a Year of Atonement, his leadership would, in fact, mark the dawn of a golden era reminiscent of other great periods of rejuvenation and reform within the Church, such as the Counter Reformation of the 16th century. And, of course, we would begin to witness the conversions and miracles that have characterized the great revivals in the long history of the Church—even from the beginning, when Saul of Tarsus's violent persecution of the Christians led to his conversion as Paul, Apostle of the Gentiles. Beyond the Church, and this is most important, the salutary effect on society at large, regardless of belief or creed, would be incalculable.

The Pope's leadership in atoning for these scandals, it seems evident to me, is just that significant.

Meanwhile, any atonement presupposes that the Vatican will undertake to renovate, totally, its system that has made the scandals possible.

The program of atonement would require an enormous task of organization. That's why I've recommended a year in which to implement such an undertaking. But the Pope has the organization in place already.

It is in the Sister Servants of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus that the Pope has the worldwide organization suited to planning and executing with his advisors a Year of Atonement. Not only are they completely and totally dedicated to lives of service to Christ and the Church, but they

are also well known to this Pope, personally, from his close association with them for many years through his predecessor, Pope John Paul II.

They served the late Pope John Paul II throughout the time when he was Cardinal Archbishop of Cracow in Poland and later, in the papal household in Rome, during his entire pontificate. The sisters were among those at his deathbed, and because John Paul had no close living relatives, they assisted in the funeral as well.

After its foundation in 1894, the Congregation of Sisters spread throughout Europe and beyond. Today, in addition to their mother house in Cracow, more than 600 sisters work in convents throughout Poland, Ukraine, France, Italy, Bolivia, Libya, the West Indies, and the United States.

In 1959, the sisters established their home in North America serving at a Vincentian seminary and high school in Erie, Pennsylvania. By 1962, they had established their first mission post in America at Portage, Pennsylvania. Today, with headquarters in Cresson, Pennsylvania, the sisters have six houses and 25 members, ranging in age from 24 to 82, in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and in the dioceses of Altoona-Johnstown, Pennsylvania; Wilmington, Delaware; and Mandeville, Jamaica, in the West Indies, which they opened in 2004. They are involved in education at all levels, in work in parish offices, and in religious ministries, and they serve in the field of personal health care—always with special emphasis on the needy. Moreover, they have lay associates who assist them in their work.

Did the Pope have them in mind in May, when he said at Fatima, "New organizations must be established and those already existing perfected?" I wonder. I spoke with several of Sisters last year, when I wrote to the Pope, and each and every one felt the idea of atonement was solid and doable.

In a sermon I heard recently, the priest said that because of the magnitude of the challenges the Church now faces, "The saints in the coming generation will eclipse the saints of old."

As a priest and teacher, thoroughly knowledgeable with Church history, he was not suggesting the saints of the coming generation would be holier than St. Francis of Assisi or that they would be more brilliant than St. Augustine. He was making the point that the magnitude of their challenge would be just that much greater.

Meanwhile, I pray that under Pope Benedict's leadership, through his disciples throughout the world, we may all be mobilized for universal atonement, nor mobilized in vain, adapting Don Blanding, "Lest Christ--and man--be forced to climb stark Calvary again."

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