

# Remembrance, truth and reconciliation

## Hypotheses on the role of the Church in dealing with violent history

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### Introduction

*Human history is largely a history of violence. This is taught us by experience, as well as by the Bible, where banishment from Paradise leads directly to fratricide in the second generation of humankind. Cain strikes down Abel, so the story goes. This incident remains typical and characteristic of how history went on from that point. It's still going on today, every day, all over the world. How, given such circumstances, are people able to live together in peace? The Bible gives a clear, unanimous answer to this question: God Himself needs to intervene in the – so to speak – mechanical process of violence and to interrupt it so that people can start afresh. The Bible refers to this as the core of Salvation: God taking the initiative, again and again, to enable a complete, and unexpected, reset in a situation that appears to be completely forlorn, and opening up a future for His people. Faith therefore refers to the past, not seeking to engage in historical research, but in the form of remembrance, always including the admission of culpable failure and thankfulness towards God.*

### Hypotheses:

- 1. Proclaiming and giving witness to the Gospel of the reconciliation of Man with and through God in word and deed is the Church's most important task.**

The term “reconciliation” occurs only rarely in the New Testament. It does however take up a central place in the proclamation of Paul, who uses it to sum up the entire work of salvation of Jesus Christ. Paul deliberately uses a Greek word closely related to war and enmity. Reconciliation helps to avoid war, or to prevent the continuation of enmity once war has ended. In Paul's eyes, Jesus Christ puts an end to the enmity between Mankind and God. The Apostle's most important text can be found in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, where we read: *“So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation.”* (2 Cor 5:17-18). This ministry relates not only to the Apostles and to individual Christians, but it concerns the entire community of faith, and it includes not only Christian teaching, but the very life of the Christian community: The call goes out at the beginning of the Letter to the Philippians *“Only, conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ”* (Phil 1:27). Paul sums up this Gospel as follows in the Letter to the Romans: *“Indeed, if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how much more, once reconciled, will we be saved by his life. Not only that, but we also boast*

*of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” (Romans 5:10-11)*

**2. Violence and the overcoming of violence are not marginal topics of the Church’s proclamation, but form a major element of the Good News of reconciliation.**

The most significant and best known symbol of the Christian faith is the Cross. In the historical reality of Roman rule, crucifixion stood for one of the cruellest methods of killing ever invented by humans, particularly for the disgracing it involved, and in terms of exclusion from the social and political community. Christian theology has given much thought to the salvific importance of death on the Cross, but the aspect of the violent nature of this incident tends to go by the wayside. It has thus created the impression that the violent nature of this death is basically only an incidental, external characteristic of the salvific events. But this violence on the one hand, and Jesus’ foregoing of violence, his voluntary self-sacrifice on the Cross on the other, are inextricable from one another in a perspective of the history of salvation. To recap: From a biblical point of view, human history “out of Eden” starts, and not by chance, with a fratricide, and the First Letter of John links this act of violence, again not coincidentally, with the core of the Gospel: *“For this is the message you have heard from the beginning: we should love one another, unlike Cain who belonged to the evil one and slaughtered his brother.” (1 John 3:11)*

**3. The Christian faith as a way of living includes a desire for peace and a willingness to reconcile as an indispensable characteristic of Christian and church life.**

Violence is a social phenomenon, given that it takes place between people. However, it strains or destroys the social relationships on the framework of which human communities are built. Evil causes harm to the community, always and everywhere, by creating enmity. One can understand against this background when Jesus says to Mathew in his Sermon on the Mount: *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Mt 5:9)*. Making peace entails creating a community and conserving a community, or healing a broken community. Making peace entails a desire for peace and the willingness to reconcile. Paul exhorts us to *“hate what is evil, hold on to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; anticipate one another in showing honor. (...) Do not repay anyone evil for evil; be concerned for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, on your part, live at peace with all.” (Romans 12:9-10 and 17-18)*. The Letter to the Colossians requires the following basic Christian approach: *“bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body.” (Col 3:13-15)*.

**4. In the Eucharist, the Church acts as the Sacrament of reconciliation by bringing together the vertical and horizontal dimensions of reconciliation.**

In his understanding of reconciliation, Paul distinguishes between a horizontal and a vertical dimension: reconciliation of Humankind with God, and reconciliation between people. The two are however inextricable, given that reconciliation with God both provides the foundation for and enables reconciliation between people. The Church is the social venue and the space in which this binding of foundation and consequence finds its concrete expression, most clearly in the Eucharist. It demonstrates all the major elements of two-dimensional reconciliation: praise and thanks to God for His reconciliation on the one hand, and celebrating together the community that has become reconciled through God on the other, a community which confesses its guilt at the beginning of the celebration of the Eucharist, which exchanges the greeting of peace, and which at its conclusion is sent out into the world with the peace of Christ. Thus the Church completes reconciliation as a Sacrament which shows as a symbol what it achieves.

**5. The credibility of the Church's proclamation depends vitally on Her ability to openly and publicly confess Her own entanglement in violence and suppression.**

The Church is not a platonic idea, but a social reality as a community which, as Vatican II says "is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds" (Gaudium et Spes No. 1). She therefore shares "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age", and partakes of their "energies, [...] tragedies and [...] triumphs" (No. 2). This is a far cry from only observing the "theatre of man's history" from afar; She Herself acts there as a sufferer and a player, frequently subject to violence, but often also wielding violence, both as a victim and as a perpetrator. True, Christ has broken the dominion of evil, but as long as history lasts, the Church nonetheless remains a community of believers and sinners. As such, She is both in need of reconciliation, reconciled and willing to reconcile. She requires a constant renewal of penance and conversion. Both of these are contingent on truthfulness, and on the acknowledgement and confession of one's own failure and guilt. The ability to admit one's guilt and ask for forgiveness is hence a vital touchstone for whether the Church really and effectively believes in God's unconditional love in which She can unreservedly trust, also with Her disgrace.

**6. Our view of our guilt- and violence-marred past is constantly blurred by the temptation to lie and to deceive ourselves, aiming to alleviate or indeed cure the pain of shame.**

Asking about our own guilt means of necessity having to look into the past. The evil that we have done, or the good that we have left undone, is always behind us; it is part of our history, and in some way it is part of our identity. Our hindsight therefore always entails looking back on ourselves, and unavoidably shows two sides: We ask what happened, that is we seek the facts of history, and we ask in what way we are responsible for what happened. The first question is historical, and can take on the shape of intellectual history-writing, whilst the second question is ethical in nature. The ethical question unavoidably strikes at the heart of my identity because the question arises in each moral decision not only as to what I should do, but at the same time who I want to be. Those

who have contracted guilt have therefore taken the wrong decision in factual terms, and have at the same time transgressed against themselves. It is only half the truth for us to view sin as transgressing against God's will. The whole truth is that we always sin against ourselves at the same time, that is against the person we should be, that we would like to be and that we could be. We often say: "I would like to be able to look myself in the mirror in the morning", and as we say this we express our desire for a good conscience, the desire to be in moral harmony with ourselves, or in a nutshell, to be at peace with ourselves and reconciled. If, however, the picture that we see in the mirror differs from the image that we have of ourselves, then we are ashamed, and this shame causes us pain. It may be so painful that we no longer wish to see what we see, that we are tempted to falsify our past, and to gloss over our memories. We would like to have been innocent, and we start to lie and deceive ourselves in order to achieve this state of fictitious innocence. We re-invent our history, and with it ourselves as innocent lambs.

## **7. The National Socialist past proves how strong the temptation can be to deny painful facts and to flee from our own responsibility.**

When the monstrous scale of the National Socialist crimes gradually dawned on the world and on Germany after the end of the Second World War, members of the younger generation in particular, such as myself, asked their parents more and more insistently what they had known about these monstrosities, and this naturally also entailed the question, unspoken in most cases, as to whether they had actually partaken of these crimes. The victorious Western powers organised questionnaires shortly after the end of the War to find something out about the attitude of the German population, and what they had known. The most common answer that the interviewers were given at that time was: "We didn't know anything about it!" The officers reported with irony that they had not met a single Nazi in their many interviews all over Germany. The Nazis were Hitler, Goebbels, Göring and Himmler, a small group of criminals, whilst the rest of the German people didn't know about anything, or had been against the Nazis. – What were we younger people supposed to think about statements like that? We had not been there ourselves, and so we could only examine in retrospect whether what we were told was in any way plausible. My doubts about this grew and grew, until I was convinced that I was surrounded by a wall of silence and concealment, of lies and self-deceit. The reason for this was as simple as it was disconcerting: The Nazis had set up a concentration camp in my small home town in which there were no Jews, since they had been transported to the death camps in the East, and which housed only a few German inmates. The vast majority of the camp inmates came from other European countries, made up of almost thirty nations. The camp was not particularly large, being only one of the many satellite camps of Flossenbürg concentration camp where Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other members of the resistance were executed. The Nazis had built it for prisoners who were to dig an underground aircraft engine factory into the mountain. The inmates had to walk several kilometres from the camp to the mine early in the morning, and they took the same route back in the evening. This route went right across my home town, so that the people of the town saw a wretched procession of emaciated, exhausted, dirt-encrusted people going past their houses and windows twice a day. At the end of the marching column, several

inmates pulled a cart laden with the bodies of those prisoners who had collapsed en route and been shot by the SS guards. – I heard nothing about these facts during my childhood. There was absolute silence on this subject, and when there was no longer any denying their existence after some of the SS members working in the concentration camp were put on trial and the court found that several thousand prisoners had died or been killed in this camp, they still said: “We knew nothing about it!”. Only those who had been children at that time and lived close to the camp related frankly that they had often stood at the barbed wire fence to watch prisoners being hanged in the campground because of the funny way they often wriggled on the gallows. But the adults knew nothing; they had never heard anything or seen anything. – And that was by no means everything: When the Red Army pushed further and further from East to West towards the end of the War, the Nazis hurriedly closed down the death camps and destroyed the incinerators to dispose of the evidence of their crimes. Thousands and thousands of surviving prisoners were crammed onto freight trains and taken to the territory the German Reich. One of these death trains had to interrupt its journey at the station in my home town because of the persistent attacks from low-flying aircraft. It stood there for days and nights, fully-laden with hundreds of exhausted people, dying of thirst and starvation, still shouting at first, begging for water and bread, and gradually falling silent. But, what a miracle, all of this was completely hidden to the residents of my hometown. No one heard anything, no one saw anything. And many years later, when citizens applied to the town council to put up commemorative plaques at the places where the monstrosities had taken place, the majority of the council turned it down. Did no one really know anything? We would have had to be mad to believe all these excuses and lies. No, the bitter truth was that everyone in my hometown knew everything, but they didn’t want to know it. Maybe they really had no idea about the horrors of the death camps, but they had seen the cruelty and the murders happening before their very eyes. But they were struck blind. The disgrace was too great, the guilt too massive, and the shame too profound to bear the truth.

**8. Not everyone is guilty, and not everyone bears the same degree of guilt, but it is true for everyone that the victims have a right to the truth and everyone has a duty to be truthful.**

We speak of denial and suppression of the truth, and we speak of a temptation which existed not only in Germany, and which exists to the present day. It is about a universal phenomenon and a profoundly human problem. None of us should consider ourselves immune to this danger. Younger people frequently tend towards arrogance in this respect and to be falsely sure of themselves. Sometimes when we young Germans reproachfully asked our parents what they had done in the Third Reich, they answered by asking: What would you have done? Can you really be sure of your innocence? Certainly no one can; no one knows what they would have done in this or that situation, or what they would do, particularly when the right decision requires courage because it can cost your life. The search for the truth affects both the victims and the perpetrators, and if we want to understand what happened and how it came to pass, we also need to try and understand what motivated the perpetrators, and why they did what they did. It may well be that they have absolutely no desire to speak of it, and if they nevertheless do so, they serve up a whole menu of lies in an attempt to totally justify what they did. But there is a truth to

which the victims above all have a right. The past is the past, and not even God, as Saint Thomas of Aquinas wrote, can change it or make it undone. On the other hand, someone very clever once said that the Soviet Union was the only country in the world where the past could not be predicted. This was a caustic comment on the tendency of all dictatorships to engage in a policy on the past based on a misrepresentation of the facts of history, to whitewash them or quite simply to deny them. Fake news is certainly nothing new, but even when the facts come to light, the moral responsibility for the misdeeds of the past is denied. People like to talk of mistakes and errors, of tragic mistakes and errors, without a doubt, but not actual guilt, shame and remorse. To err is human, and who would level a reproach against someone who has made a mistake, and who may have done so with the best of intentions and with a good conscience? There is no remedy against these strategies of falsifying history and moral self-deburdening other than the desire to be truthful. The truth alone sets us free, as it says in John.

**9. Remembrance and reconciliation take time and people who have the courage to face up to the past.**

German society took many years and decades to face up to its National Socialist past. This laborious, difficult process would have been impossible without the complete defeat of the Third Reich in the War. The allied occupying forces brought about a radical transformation in the political structures, destroyed the National Socialist institutions, and disempowered the elites of the Third Reich. They forced parts of the population to visit the liberated concentration camps, to look at the mountains of martyred bodies and to bury them. They carried out extensive testing to identify active Nazis, and sometimes to punish them. However, this massive effort was only of limited success, and the effort to overcome the past ended in total failure in some respects. It was revealed that pressure from outside is not enough to change people's internal attitudes and stances. Many people, women and men alike, need to voluntarily pluck up the courage to address the past self-critically and critically: honest contemporary witnesses, dedicated prosecutors and judges, conscientious historians. Pioneers of reconciliation need to cross boundaries, must seek trust with patience, must take new paths and detours using their imagination to achieve their goal. What they need above all is to have a thick skin. They trigger not only resistance, but frequently also hostility and defamation, and sometimes even violence. We Christians should not be surprised about this. As Jesus says to his disciples in the second farewell discourse in the Gospel according to John: *"If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first."* (John 15:18)

**10. In comparison to the rest of society, the Christian Churches have not behaved in an exemplary fashion in every respect when addressing the National Socialist past. They not lastly did more to prevent the criminal prosecution of Nazis than to promote it.**

The German Churches were one of the few institutions in Germany that appeared to the victorious powers at the end of the War to be largely beyond suspicion and trustworthy. True, they were not directly involved in the Regime's crimes, and a large number of

Christian women and men had risked or even sacrificed their lives in the resistance. It was these secret or famous heroes that the Churches had to thank for a large part of their good reputation. However, they had received little help or support from the Churches in the time of the resistance, either financial or logistical or moral. Austrian farmer Franz Jägerstätter, who was planning to refuse to render war service because he considered the War to be a crime, sought the advice of his local priest and his bishop, who did not strengthen him in his intentions, or at least support him, but sought to stop him, and reminded him of his duty. Other opponents of the Regime were also left alone when addressing questions of conscience, but they helped later to give the Churches a good conscience. The first and most important statement of the Catholic Church after the War related to the charge of Germans' collective guilt, which the bishops rejected. This was well and good, but it also spared the German population the effort of seriously and honestly examining the degree to which they shared responsibility for National Socialist rule. And the Churches themselves, with one exception, saw no reason to admit their guilt, to show remorse and penance for having done too little to combat the Nazis. True, there was a limit to what the Churches could do in a dictatorship, but they could do some things, as was demonstrated by the protest against the murder of disabled people, the so-called Euthanasia Programme. But all in all, the bishops limited themselves to criticising the Nazi Regime when its activities were directed against the Church's concerns and interests. Large numbers of Catholic priests issued certificates to members of the Nazi Party after the War that were intended to prove their innocence. A whole number of SS officers and wanted war criminals escaped to Latin America or the Near East with the help of the Church. The so-called "ratline" became quite proverbial among allied investigators. This was certainly an extreme, but it signalled a trend which did not come up to the Church's self-image and self-perception.

**11. Under the influence of the Second Vatican Council and of the Council Popes, the Catholic Church opted in the second half of the 20th Century for a clear human rights policy. She developed large numbers of initiatives and tools for a reconciliation-orientated policy on the past.**

The Catholic Church frequently played an ambivalent role in the context of the dictatorships of the 20th Century. It was primarily individual personalities – bishops, priests and laity – who gave an unmistakable witness for the truth, and who today are rightly honoured by the Catholic people, and some of them have even been officially recognised as Blesseds or Saints. Pope John Paul II above all did much to ensure this, and emphasised this effort by means of many confessions of guilt for the failure of members of the Church in a variety of historical situations. After the Council, national Bishops' Conferences came out in favour of truth commissions, established documentation centres for human rights violations, launched or supported reconciliation initiatives, and provided assistance or did political work through church organisations. In Germany, the Catholic Church and organisations such as PAX CHRISTI, the Maximilian Kolbe Association and others acted as a social and political avantgarde in German-French and German-Polish reconciliation. This has brought the Church a great deal of public recognition and esteem. It becomes all the more painfully clear against this background what loss of trust the Church's abuse scandals cause among the public. The policy of the institutional Church,

consisting of basking in silence in this regard in order to protect the Church from harm, has achieved more than the opposite, and it casts a long, dark shadow over the Gospel of reconciliation.