

Discussion Group "Jews and Christians"
Central Committee of German Catholics

After 50 Years: How Can We Talk about Guilt, Suffering and Reconciliation?

A Declaration of February 19, 1988

The desire to forget
prolongs Exile,
to remember is the secret
of redemption.¹

Time is pressing

In November 1988, it will be 50 years since the day that was given the ridiculing name of "Reichskristallnacht" (Night of Broken Glass). The violent acts committed then were a further radicalization of the persecution of the Jews, which finally ended with the murder of six million Jewish men, women and children. The sad result of the mass pogrom organized by the government during the night of November 9th to 10th, 1938: almost 100 Jews were murdered, many were maltreated, and over 30,000 were locked up in concentration camps. In all of Germany, synagogues and cemeteries were desecrated, set on fire, or destroyed, Jewish shops and living quarters were looted and demolished.

Unlike the subsequent Shoah² in the extermination camps, these events happened in the sight of all. You not only could see them, you had to see them! This is why, today, the old question assails us, how people, and above all Christians, reacted to these events: There was much indifference and vileness, raw violence, systematic pillaging, and open rejoicing over damage done, but there were also signs of indignation, of sympathy, and of willingness to help.

We do not intend in this declaration to pass historical judgment as to the behavior of those involved at the time. Why the churches did not then condemn what happened more clearly and distinctly, and to what extent this was due to the churches' insufficient awareness of their bond with the Jewish people, are questions which need to be worked on separately and which urgently need to be explored. However, the fact that the churches did then act as they did weighs still today as a burden on the relationship between Jews and Christians. As members of the discussion group "Jews and Christians" in the Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken, we are particularly burdened by the fact that the bishops remained silent

¹ Quoted as a saying of Jewish wisdom in the speech given by President Richard von Weizsaecker on May 8, 1985, on the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II. Published in: Bulletin des Presse- und Informationsamtes der Bundesregierung 52 (1985), p. 441-448. The saying is also written on the Yad vaShem memorial in Jerusalem, where it is ascribed to the Baal Shem Tov (ca. 1700-1760).

² Shoah, derived from the etymological root which means "destroy, lay waste", is the Hebrew expression for the murder of the six million Jews. The word is more correct than Holocaust (biblically: whole offering).

at the time; for they were the only people who could still speak in public. Their clear and unambiguous rejection of Nazi racism³, which they had renewed more than once, could have been concretized in this situation, even though, and perhaps also precisely because, the church itself was in great straits. It would have been sufficient, to take a clear stand, to say a few simple words like those of the Berlin cathedral dean, Bernhard Lichtenberg: "We know what was yesterday. We do not know what will be tomorrow; but we experienced what happened today. Outside, the synagogue is burning. It, too, is a house of God."⁴

Still today, half a century later, we Jews and Christians are speechless before the incomprehensible horror of what happened during the Nazi regime. It is still difficult for Jews and Christians to overcome this inability to speak.

In 1979, our discussion group took a necessary step towards new horizons in Jewish-Christian theological discussion and collaboration by publishing a declaration on "Theological emphases in Jewish-Christian dialogue".⁵ This was and continues to be a helpful and sufficient basis for our theological discussion leading on to a dialogue, of which "the essential and central aspect" should be" ... the encounter between today's Christian churches and today's people of the covenant concluded with Moses."⁶

But Jews and Christians are not only separated by theology. We feel, each of us in a different way, the burden of history. In our discussion group, we also had to go through the painful experience of realizing that time alone does not heal wounds. We had thought that in fifteen years of Christian-Jewish dialogue, we had learned how to think, pray, act, and live with one another. Nevertheless, we ourselves experienced as a breaking open of old wounds the bitter controversy surrounding President Reagan's and Federal Chancellor Kohl's visit to the Bitburg military cemetery (which had been meant as a gesture of reconciliation). Not only in the wider public, but even in our midst, there was a wall of misunderstanding and irritation, which placed a very basic question mark behind the "we" of Jews and Christians in Germany. For a while, some even felt that it was no longer possible for them to belong to our discussion group. Personal sharing and theological discussion within our group, as well as the speech given by our president of the time on May 8, 1985, and our encounter with American Jewry during March 1986 in New York, helped us to break through to a new mode of speaking together, a mode which has been purified by suffering.

³ The encyclical, "Mit brennender Sorge" which German bishops had suggested and had helped to write, and which was read from every pulpit on March 21, 1937, emphasized the incompatibility of the church's teaching with Nazi racism; on April 13, 1938, the Vatican called upon all Catholic universities and theological faculties to combat the Nazi racist ideology; in August 1938, the bishops' conference in Fulda published a pastoral letter to the clergy "on the religious-ethical errors in the teaching on racism".

⁴ Hans-Georg Mann, Bernhard Lichtenberg (1875-1943), In: Wolfgang Knauff (Ed.), *Miterbauer des Bistums Berlin. 50 Jahre Geschichte in Charakterbildern*, Berlin 1979, p.72.

⁵ In: *Berichte und Dokumente*, ed. Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken, Bonn, Issue 39 (1979) p. 6-19.

⁶ Pope John Paul II in Mainz, November 17, 1980, during his encounter with representatives of the German Jews. In: *Kirchen und das Judentum: Dokumente von 1945-1985*, Rolf Rendtorff/Hans Hermann Henrix (Ed.), Paderborn: Bonifatius/Munich: Kaiser 1988, p. 76.

During the last three years, we Christians realized anew that it is really a miracle when a Jew can grasp the hand stretched out towards him, after all the suffering and injustice inflicted upon his people and upon his relatives and acquaintances. Although many Jews were even the first to stretch out their hand in reconciliation, others still have to learn to take this step, and to understand that reconciliation does not mean treason towards the dead. However, we Christians have also to learn that we can only ask for reconciliation, not for forgiveness, and that we can only ask for it and not demand it. If a Jew does not or not yet feel able to fulfill our request, there are no grounds on which to press him, not even through well-meant "simple expectations". We must bear this lack of simultaneousness.

In any case, it is false to believe that time heals. Most wounds scar over, but they continue to be painful: however, "the Shoah is a deep wound that is still bleeding".⁷ But this is no reason to let time pass by unused; for the later we begin, the harder it is to recognize the situation and to draw right conclusions from it.

These experiences made us recognize: our 1979 paper needs to be amplified; especially the question posed by the post-war generations regarding the type and the degree of our responsibility - a question, which has come more clearly to the fore - must be taken up so that it will become a basis for the encounter between German Catholics and Jews. More than forty years after the end of World War II, we must still continue to work on the foundations of our encounter and to learn to be able to ask together: "How can we talk about guilt, suffering, and reconciliation?"

This is why, 50 years after the Reichspogromnacht, the discussion group "Jews and Christians" in the Central Committee of German Catholics worked out these theological reflections and entitled them: "After 50 years - how can we talk about, guilt, suffering, and reconciliation?"

Jews and Christians face a question

We Jews and Christians acknowledge a common testimony, which is grounded in God's call: we "are caretakers and witnesses of an ethical system characterized by the Ten Commandments; in obeying these, the human person finds truth and liberty."⁸ This testimony is important for the future of the world, and therefore we bear a common responsibility. "One of the great obligations of our day is to foster collaboration and shared thinking in this area."⁹ However, again and again the burdens of the past get in our way when we want to tackle our tasks for the future. We simply cannot look at the future and in so doing ignore the past: for what happened in the past is the basis from which we must start; "whoever closes his/her eyes to the past, becomes blind about the present."¹⁰

And when Christians, especially Christians in Germany, only want to talk with Jews about the future, they make their partner suspect - often without realizing it and

⁷ In: L'Osservatore Romano, June 25, 1987, p. 1.

⁸ Pope John Paul II on the occasion of his visit in the synagogue of Rome on April 13, 1986, in: Freiburger Rundbrief 37/38 (1985/86), p. 5.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Richard von Weizsaecker in his speech on May 8, 1985, p. 443.

without wanting to - that their primary intention is to confirm that the past is over, that they want to be "unburdened", and not to return and draw nearer to the Jewish people through solidarity, understanding, and concern. And precisely because of this, the burdens of the past remain as an unarticulated barrier between us and are all the more paralyzing. As long as the past is excluded, there is only alienation, and no reconciliation. Unfortunately, part of the curse of evil is that the one upon whom wrong has been inflicted is often felt (and attacked) as an abiding reproach. The decision not to close our eyes to the past must come sincerely from our own heart, must flow from our own need: "The practical sincerity of our desire for renewal also depends on the acknowledgment of our guilt and on our willingness to learn painfully from our country's as well as our church's history of guilt."¹¹ We have to work on ourselves in order to be capable of this.

To refuse to learn from past guilt, as also to deny being affected, are repressions; for none of us can not be affected. We are caught up too deeply in guilt and suffering with all their consequences. We must face this past of guilt precisely by giving the guilt a concrete name; otherwise we are easily in danger of hiding anonymously behind a general acknowledgment of guilt.

For there is guilt and guilt, discovered or hidden, admitted or denied. There is the guilt of having done something evil and that of not having done something good, the guilt of the inhuman deed and that of the refusal to be a fellow human being. There is help granted and the omission of help, the shouting with others and keeping silent.

Similarly to guilt, suffering is also many-sided, be it physical or psychological. There is the suffering of those who did not escape, and that of those who left someone behind; the suffering of those who had to watch helplessly, and that of those who, being born after the event, suffer in the second generation. There is also the suffering of those who recognize their guilt and desire forgiveness and reconciliation, as well as the suffering of those who want to forgive but cannot.

To learn from the history of guilt means: to accept and to bear sorrow. We share the grief - sorrowing over what happened to us, our guilt, our suffering. We mourn the people and the communities that were murdered and annihilated, the Jewish culture in Germany and in the rest of Europe which was destroyed, and the faith in our fellow human being, which was almost taken, especially from us Jews.

However, what weighs above all on us Christians is the awareness of the devastation which previous guilt towards the Jews has caused between our communities. This derives from evil and will lead to further evil, if it is not counteracted. To overcome it remains the task of all who are affected in various ways: those who are directly guilty, if they are still alive; those who were contemporaries at the time and who carry within themselves the unpaid debt of their entanglement in the terrible events, even if they themselves committed no crime; and those who weren't even born at the time or who were children and who

¹¹ The German Synod's Declaration on Hope: "Unsere Hoffnung IV,2" in: Gemeinsame Synode der Bistümer in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Offizielle Gesamtausgabe vol. I, Freiburg i. Br. 1976, p. 108.

nevertheless are called upon to take on a liability for something which they themselves did not do.¹² For we hope that they too will help to lower the mountain of estrangement and enmity which has grown up between us.

Return and Repentance as understood by Jews and Christians

This is why our discussion group is constantly confronted with the question: "How can we bring guilt and suffering before God, instead of repressing them or becoming fixed on them?" Because of our faith, we have the hope that this is possible. For we trust in a God who has the power to forgive and to overcome wrongdoing, who not only demands repentance of the human person, but also offers it to him/her. "When we come to God as sinners seeking our salvation, the call to return is already effective in us. Return is ... the path to joy and freedom as God's children which is opened up to us sinners."¹³ Our discussions about how we handle suffering and guilt have shown that what we have in common is not limited to the biblical foundations. We learned that our penitential guidelines, as interpreted by our respective traditions today, can bring us together too.

We have worked on what we can say together. We discovered that Christians can fully affirm and experience what Jews say about guilt, suffering, and forgiveness without feeling that anything is lacking. In doing so, we Christians do not ignore the fact that we find repentance and renewal only through Christ and in the communion with God which he offers. Nevertheless, we Christians do not know any other mode or measure of forgiveness and reconciliation, of long suffering and courage than the Jews do. And it was not our task to discuss differences in teaching. Our goal is reconciliation in encounter. Thus, our rootedness in Jesus Christ, precisely while reflecting on guilt, repentance, and reconciliation, does not hinder us in recognizing that we share, because of our roots, with our Jewish partners in dialogue a deep agreement in the matter itself. We consider this congruence to be a solid bridge to real encounter. We hope to contribute thereby to that area of dialogue, which the Pope characterized as its most important one.¹⁴

However, this congruence caused us to think further about our "penitential guidelines", which concern themselves with the individual, to reflect further on them in regard to the historical and social dimensions of our guilt and suffering due to the Hitler dictatorship. For it was precisely the fact that our different religious traditions agree profoundly as to trust in God's coming to meet us, which gave and gives us strength and hope. For it is this first step of God's which alone makes repentance possible, a repentance, however, which is more than wishful thinking and which demands of the human person that he/she really strives towards this

¹² "The burden of history remains - our common responsibility for the past remains. During these days we are often involuntarily reminded of this. But we should also think of this of our own accord. Not in a self-tormenting passion, to which we Germans tend all too easily; but in honest, sober reflection. This is also our task as Christians." Hans Maier in: *Der 8. Mai 1945 und die deutschen Katholiken*, ed. Generalsekretariat des Zentralkomitees der deutschen Katholiken, Kevelaer 1985, p. 21.

¹³ The German Synod's Declaration on Sacraments: "Schwerpunkte heutiger Sakramentenpastoral C 3", in: *Gemeinsame Synode der Bistümer in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Offizielle Gesamtausgabe vol. I, Freiburg i. Br. 1976, p. 261.

¹⁴ Cf. Pope John Paul II in Mainz, p. 152.

goal with all his/her strength.

Having thus come to the conviction that essential elements and principles of our different traditions can help us to recognize what we should do and of what we should bear witness, we have tried in the following to continue the lines of thought of the catholic penitential guidelines¹⁵ and of the Jewish "Laws of Return" (Hilchot T'shuvah)¹⁶, which are both results of each tradition's specific understanding of the biblical message, and to develop out of them propositions which can show us the way towards reconciliation between Jews and Christians.

Traditional teachings and the new dimension of the problem

The penitential guidelines and Hilchot T'shuvah aim at helping the person to recognize the wrong he/she has done, to work through his/her guilt, and to overcome his/her estrangement from God. It is our task now to recognise these essential elements and principles in our different traditions, which are valid and important for us today in regard to the problem with which we are concerned.

However, our theological teachings are challenged beyond their capacity when faced with the uniqueness of the event of the Shoah. Our traditional theological concepts are inadequate in this context, because on the one hand, what happened is beyond any imagining; and on the other hand, the problem is not only one of overcoming the guilt of an individual in his/her relationship to his/her own community, but rather also the enmity which has grown up between the communities. The penitential guidelines and Hilchot T'shuvah however concentrate more on the personal guilt of the individual. It is rightly said that guilt, "like innocence, is not collective, but personal"¹⁷ nevertheless, the evil deeds of individuals often leave deep traces in the life of the community of which they are members or for whom they even act. We cannot, on the one hand, profess our membership to a community, and on the other hand, evade co-responsibility for what was done or not done in the name of that community by pointing out our own innocence.

Whoever sins against his/her fellow human being sins at the same time against God and alienates him-/herself from God. Then to return to God is not possible without turning towards the fellow human person who has been offended, damaged or defamed. For: "The Day of Atonement atones for the sins of the human person against God; the Day of Atonement does not atone for sins of the human person against his/her fellow human being until the latter's forgiveness has been

¹⁵ Cf. "Die Feier der Buße nach dem neuen Rituale Romanum. Studienausgabe" (The penitential rite according to the new Rituale Romanum), Freiburg i. Br. 1974. Even though this rite is a consequence of Vatican Council II, it does not replace, but rather develops what was contained in the traditional penitential rite. Cf. also the decision of the German Synod, "Schwerpunkte heutiger Sakramentenpastoral C": and also: Katholischer Erwachsenen-Katechismus. Das Glaubensbekenntnis der Kirche, vol. I, ed. Deutsche Bischofskonferenz, Kevelaer etc. 1985, p. 363-372.

¹⁶ The traditional Jewish teachings on remorse, penitence and return were collected, among others, by Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) in his Mishneh Torah and entitled "Hilchot T'shuvah" (Laws of Repentance). His work is still authoritative today.

¹⁷ Richard von Weizsaecker in his speech on May 8, 1985, p. 443.

attained"¹⁸; and the directive of Jesus is similar: "If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Mt 5,23f.) But the sinner also sins against the community of which he/she is a part, and alienates him-/herself from it. That "sin, through which the individual sins against God, ... (is) always also a sin against the ecclesial community, which suffers from it"¹⁹, applies not only to sins against God in the narrower sense; for sins against our neighbour are also sins against God. The full reintegration into the community is therefore supposed to give the repentant the confidence that he/she has also been accepted again by God. But this is again true primarily as regards the individual sinner who is accepted again by his/her community. We, however, are confronted with the sin of one community against another one, and that one, the Jewish community, had just begun to hope that, after previous persecutions and disparagements, it would now finally be respected and gradually accepted. The wrongdoings of individuals against individuals are embedded within the greater whole of the wrongdoings of one community to another. And "we all, whether we are guilty or not, whether we are old or young, must accept the past ... are affected by its consequences, and bear liability for it."²⁰

Therefore, what we need in order to overcome the evil in the community, is not only the consciousness of "collective shame"²¹, but also the willingness to accept liability²², to bear, along with others, the burden which weighs on the community. For we also read: "In addition, people often sin together. But they also help one another when they do penance."²³ In the good, as in the bad, a person is affected by the deeds and behavior of his/her community. This is not only true for the generation of those "who were there", but for everyone of whose history the Shoah is a part. This is why we all speak as people who are affected and concerned, why we can and may speak only as such, and why we do so in the hope that "penance always also (leads) to reconciliation with the brothers and sisters to whom damage is done through sin."²⁴

Prior to full atonement and return to God, forgiveness from the person against whom the sin has been committed is required - not however, before beginning the process of atonement, which is the prerequisite for forgiveness. There is no return to God without a wholehearted turn towards the person against whom one has sinned. We must get forgiveness from him/her, though we cannot demand it. However the big problem is: for sins between individuals, we can really only forgive the suffering that has been inflicted upon us; and to the extent to which it happened to us; and conversely, we can really only ask for forgiveness for ourselves for the

¹⁸ Mishna Yoma VIII, 9. Similarly, this is also true of the penitential rite, "Die Feier der Buße nach dem neuen Rituale Romanum. Pastorale Einfuehrung Nr. 18," p. 19: The act of penance "can consist in prayer, self-denial, and above all in serving one's neighbor, so that the social dimensions of sin and forgiveness may be made visible."

¹⁹ The German Synod's Declaration "Schwerpunkte heutiger Sakramentenpastoral C 2", p. 260.
²⁰ Richard von Weizsaecker in his speech on May 8, 1985, p. 443.

²¹ Theodor Heuss, Courage to Love, speech given on December 7, 1949. In: Theodor Heuss: An und über Juden, Duesseldorf/Wien 1964, p. 122 f.

²² Richard von Weizsaecker in his speech on May 8, 1985, p. 443.

²³ "Die Feier der Buße nach dem neuen Rituale Romanum. Pastorale Einfuehrung Nr. 5", p. 12.

²⁴ Ibid.

deeds and omissions of which we ourselves are guilty and to the extent to which we are guilty.

A person can only forgive the sin and the suffering which was inflicted upon him/her; the individual can only ask for forgiveness for the sin which he/she committed. This is particularly significant in our situation - a situation of which President Herzog rightly said: "Only the dead have the right to forgive, and the living are not permitted to forget."²⁵ This is not a renunciation of the obligation and willingness to be reconciled, but rather the expression of a great awareness and maturity: the survivors and those who were born after the people murdered in Auschwitz have no authority to speak for the dead. Martin Buber's utterance: "What am I that I could presume to forgive here?"²⁶, expresses neither a desire for vengeance nor a refusal to be reconciled, but rather a deep respect for the dead; not a refusal to forgive, but rather a rejection of what would be a presumption. This Jewish testimony can call Christians to reflect anew on their understanding of forgiveness.

Therefore, as helpful as the traditional teachings on repentance and penance are, for the reconciliation between Jews and Christians we cannot avoid the realization that the traditional modes of behavior must be reconsidered in a new and deeper way in order to apply them to the wrong for which one community as a whole must assume responsibility towards another community to whom, as a whole, wrong has been done. This is precisely where a lot of theological thinking has still to be done.

Steps in repentance

The stations in the process of atonement with God are remorse, admission of guilt and responsibility, the attempt to make reparation, the request for forgiveness from and reconciliation with the person to whom damage was done: "One must appease him/her and beg him/her to forgive ... however, a person should not be stubborn by refusing to be appeased ... If one is asked to forgive, one should do so gladly and wholeheartedly."²⁷ The request for and the granting of forgiveness must be sincere, "wholehearted". All of us, Jews and Christians, must work on ourselves in order to be able to do this. "Forgiveness" which is granted too quickly, lightly, and basically insincerely, does not lead to reconciliation, but only to repression among all concerned, and it damages everyone concerned. But above all, in our relationships with human beings it is true to say: " No one can speak for God; no one can speak for others. Almost every Jew in Germany has had many people come to him/her and ask for forgiveness. What can he/she say? May he/she speak for the six million dead? May he/she speak for the Sinti-Roma, for the homosexuals? May he/she even speak for Judaism, for the Jewish people living scattered all over the world, and may he/she say: >You have been granted forgiveness!' No."²⁸

²⁵ President Chaim Herzog on April 6, 1987 in Bergen Belsen.

²⁶ 1953 in the Paulskirche on receiving the Peace Prize, quoted by Albert H. Friedlander, *Begegnung nach 40 Jahren*, in: *Der Monat* 297 (1986) p. 16.

²⁷ Moses Maimonides, *Hilchot T'shuvah* 2:9/10. Cf. also the answer given by Jesus to Peter's question, how often one must forgive one's brother: "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times!" (Mt 18,22).

²⁸ Albert H. Friedlander, *Begegnung nach 40 Jahren*, p. 28.

"If he/she has made him-/herself guilty, he/she should acknowledge the matter in which he/she has sinned." (Lev 5,5; cf. also Num 5,6f.) Before forgiveness is asked for, guilt must be acknowledged, not as a mere lip service, but as an articulated acceptance of guilt. "One must confess one's sins with words and say the things which one has decided upon in one's heart²⁹, for "through confession the human person acknowledges his/her sinful past, he/she assumes responsibility for it."³⁰ Even though, on the one hand, "the confession of guilt (...), seen even in a purely human way, has a liberating and reconciling effect (...) and at the same time the person making the confession opens him-/herself anew for God and the church community, thus gaining a new future"³¹, on the other hand, the passive acceptance of guilt is insufficient to work through that guilt and to gain atonement. Rather, it is necessary to enter actively into the past, to seek the causes not in an apologetic but in a truth-seeking way, and to be willing to express anew one's own guilt and that of previous generations in the light of the new insights gained. We must work on our guilt (as on our suffering and our sorrow), and that means above all that we must try patiently to find the factors which led to our condition.

"After I had returned, I repented ..." (Jer 31,18 resp. 19) The human person is changed by his/her return to God; for he/she can only return to God, when he/she becomes aware of his/her distance from God and of the guilt which brought it about. Return leads to remorse, and remorse to return, and in this reciprocal process of atonement, we again draw nearer to God. We may and we must rely on God's will for atonement, but precisely because we put our hope for full atonement in God, the process of atonement can never be completed for us. Atonement cannot become our "property", of which we can dispose. The more we experience the gift of atonement, the more deeply we understand that it is not something to which we have a claim. This is true of atonement with God and of reconciliation with our fellow human beings. And because the path of return is marked by dependance on each other, we can experience full atonement in a concrete place and at a certain moment in time; and yet at the same time, we must continue to ask for it and to struggle for it. The result of this is that this process is surely not possible when it is sought simply in order to get absolved from the burden of guilt feelings.

The return to God is linked to our turning towards the person who has been damaged. The effort to make reparation may not be seen as something one wants to get over with like an unpleasant burden. Rather, it must arise from remorse: it may not be simply a means of obtaining forgiveness; it does not become unnecessary through forgiveness, and it cannot be limited to a certain period in time. Satisfaction is intrinsically linked to the penitential process itself - it is its "concrete realization"³² - and even if we cannot "repair" what was done by human means, nevertheless, pain can be "alleviated" in the present and "made better" in the

²⁹ Moses Maimonides, *Hilchot T'shuvah* 2:2.

³⁰ *Katholischer Erwachsenen-Katechismus*, vol. 1, ed. Deutsche Bischofskonferenz, p. 370.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *The German Synod's Declaration "Schwerpunkte heutiger Sakramentenpastoral C 7"*, p. 265.

future, and thus at least the "curse of the evil deeds" can be broken.³³

Thus, human forgiveness and reconciliation also depend reciprocally on the process of atonement with God. Its prerequisite is the willingness to go out to meet one another and thus also to try to imitate the example given by God.

Both must go out to meet one another, both must find the way to each other again. To do this, we Jews must find our faith in our Christian fellow human beings again. And to make this possible for us is part of reparation, as it is part of the guilt that many of us were robbed of this faith; for the "Holocaust ... almost destroyed the awareness of a common humanity between Jews and non-Jews."³⁴ Not only Christians, Jews as well must learn to shake hands with the other and to take hold of hands that are stretched out timidly, since the reconciliation "between Jews and non-Jews (is) a mental and spiritual life necessity for the Jewish people"³⁵; for: "Two people, both with one past, cannot in the long run turn their backs upon each other and ignore one another. It can mean something for humanity if this peace is looked at and prepared and, God willing, ultimately reached in an honest way, and that also means: without being forgetful."³⁶ " ... there are transgressions which find expiation immediately, and others which can only be expiated after some time ..."³⁷ The length of time the process of atonement takes depends not only on the sincerity and urgency of the person seeking it and on the willingness and ability of the one forgiving; it also depends on the nature and gravity of the sin. "The act of penance and the amount of satisfaction must be in accordance with each individual person, so that he/she reestablishes order where he/she has disturbed it, and so that he/she receives a medicine which is appropriate to his/her illness."³⁸

What we must do

Neither time nor forgetting heals our wounds. We will not come closer to one another by keeping silent. In that way, all that happens is that the guilt of the one and the sorrow of the other burst forth over and over again as things that have been repressed, and they are not overcome. "There is no reconciliation without remembrance."³⁹ However, guilt may not only not be forgotten; conclusions must also be drawn from it. After all, the fall of the criminal Nazi regime does not banish the danger of a repetition (wherever and by whomsoever). The abyss, from which the sin arose, is still present. Therefore, we must be particularly attentive and

³³ Cf. Ernst Simon, *Das Zeugnis des Judentums*, Berlin 1980, quoted according to Albert H. Friedlander, *Begegnung nach 40 Jahren*, p. 23: "The new Germany can only '>work through' or '>overcome' - whatever the expression may be - its most recent past, if it is willing to do deeds of real return. Return means that, as far as possible, one makes the consequences of the evil deed become undone. No dead person is awakened to new life through return; but return can contribute towards preventing new murders and wars."

³⁴ Michael Wyschogrod. In: Wilhelm Breuning/Hanspeter Heinz (Ed.), *Damit die Erde menschlich bleibt*. Freiburg i. Br. 1985, p. 81.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

³⁶ Leo Baeck, quoted according to Albert H. Friedlander, *Begegnung nach 40 Jahren* (p. 18f.), who comments: "More than 30 years ago, (Martin Buber and Leo Baeck) showed us a path. It was too early; and the path has still not been taken."

³⁷ Moses Maimonides, *Hilchot T'shuvah* 1:4.

³⁸ "Die Feier der Buße nach dem neuen Rituale Romanum. Pastorale Einfuehrung Nr. 6", p. 14.

³⁹ Richard von Weizsaecker in his speech on May 8, 1985, p. 443.

sensitive in these areas.

The command to remember and not to forget is in no way a call to enmity. Neither is the willingness to forgive honestly and to be reconciled betrayal of the memory of those murdered. But since the wrong done to the dead cannot be repaid by human beings, this human suffering may not become subject to a "natural" process of forgetting: "To forget would be treason: If we survived in order to betray the dead, it would be better if we had not survived."⁴⁰

Our wounds can only be healed, if the first steps towards one another can be followed by many steps with one another - steps with one another in the process of working on our sorrow and in the process of atonement, and then, reconciled, steps towards the future. There can only be healing when we can wait together for the Kingdom of God, when we can work for it together and thus can "serve the Lord shoulder to shoulder". (Zeph 3,9) The will for this is a sign of hope and of confidence and an expression of our trust in a God who forgives and who can also change the wrong that has been done. But atonement with God is something which the members of a community cannot bring to a close. This is why we human beings may not pass a final judgment, just as every desire to draw a finishing line prevents the development of really trusting relations.

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