



The Holy See

**LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II
TO CARDINAL ROGER ETCHEGARAY
ON THE OCCASION OF THE PRESENTATION
OF THE VOLUME "L'INQUISIZIONE"**

*To my Venerable Brother Cardinal Roger Etchegaray,
former President of the Committee for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000*

1. I receive with deep appreciation the volume containing the *Proceedings* of the International Symposium on the Inquisition, organized at the Vatican from 29-31 October 1998 by the Historical-Theological Commission for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

This Symposium answered the desire I expressed in the Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennium Adveniente*: "...it is appropriate that... the Church should become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel and, instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the values of faith, indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly *forms of counter-witness and scandal*" (n. 33).

In public opinion, the image of the *Inquisition* is as it were the symbol of such counter-witness and scandal. How faithful to reality is this image? Before asking for forgiveness it is necessary to have exact knowledge of the facts and to put shortcomings with regard to what the Gospel requires in the context where they are effectively found. This is the reason why the Committee has consulted historians whose scientific competence is universally recognized.

2. For theologians, the irreplaceable contribution of historians contains an invitation to reflect on the conditions and life of the People of God on its way through history.

The theologians will be guided by a distinction in their critical reflection: the distinction between the authentic *sensus fidei* and the predominant mentality in a specific epoch that might have

influenced their opinion.

The *sensus fidei* must be asked to exercise the criteria of a level judgment of the life of the Church in the past.

3. This discernment is possible precisely because with the passage of time the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, perceives with ever clearer awareness what she needs in order to conform to her Bridegroom. Thus, the Second Vatican Council was able to formulate the "golden rule" that directs the defence of the truth, which is the task proper to the mission of the Magisterium. "Truth can impose itself on the mind of man only in virtue of its own truth..., which wins over the mind with both gentleness and power" (*Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 1. This assertion is quoted in *Tertio Millennium Adveniente*, cf. n. 35).

The institution of the Inquisition has been abolished. As I had an opportunity to say to the participants in the Symposium, the children of the Church cannot but return with a spirit of repentance to "the acquiescence given, especially in certain centuries, *to intolerance and even the use of violence* in the service of the truth" (*Address to the International Symposium on the Inquisition Organized by the Central Committee for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000*, 31 October 1998, n. 4; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, [ORE], 11 November 1998, p. 3).

This spirit of repentance, it is clear, entails a firm determination to seek in the future ways to bear witness to the truth that are in keeping with the Gospel.

4. On 12 March 2000, on the occasion of the liturgical celebration that marked the *Day of Pardon*, forgiveness was asked for errors committed in the service of the truth by recourse to methods not in keeping with the Gospel. The Church must carry out this service in imitation of her Lord, meek and humble of heart. The prayer I addressed to God on that occasion contains the reasons for a request for forgiveness that can also be applied to the tragedies associated with the Inquisition, as well as to the injuries to memory that result from it.

"Lord, God of all men and women,
in certain periods of history
Christians have at times given in to [forms of] intolerance and have not been faithful
to the great commandment of love,
sullyng in this way the
face of the Church,
your Spouse.

Have mercy on your sinful children
and accept our resolve
to seek and promote truth in

the gentleness of charity,
in the firm knowledge that truth
can prevail only in virtue of truth itself.

We ask this through Christ Our Lord"

(Prayer for Forgiveness, Day of Pardon, 12 March, II; ORE, 22 March 2000, p. 4).

The beautiful volume containing the *Proceedings* of the Symposium is written in the spirit of this request for forgiveness. As I thank all the participants, I invoke the divine Blessing upon them.

From the Vatican, 15 June 2004

JOHN PAUL II

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