

Benedict XVI, Rouse Yourself.
A pastoral letter from a Priest to His Pope

June 11, 2006

“Rouse Yourself ! Why do you sleep O Lord?”

Thus prayed an agonizing Pope Benedict XVI during his visit to Auschwitz on 28 May 2006.

There is a story in Sri Lanka that during the 1971 youth insurrection against the Government, a Sinhala militant youth addressed the statue of the seated Buddha thus: “Rise up, you have been seated long enough for 2500 years!”

When we fail to find acceptable reasons for inhuman cruelty, we may tend to turn to religion or a transcendent power in our distress. All of us, the peoples of all countries have unfortunate events in our histories, which we may regret and be unable to resolve satisfactorily.

The German Pope faces with humility and sincerity the difficult situation of the atrocities especially of Auschwitz, towards Jews, political prisoners, Gypsies and other victims of the Nazi regime. He is critical of the German leadership of the day and mentions also the tragic situation of the German people under the dictatorship. His was a plea for forgiveness and reconciliation and for a purification of memory “of the sufferings of men and women of a whole continent.”

“The past is never simply the past. It tells the paths to take and paths not to be taken.” He prayed for all to have “the courage to do good and to resist evil.” He praised the example of persons like Edith Stein who faced death bravely alongside the people. He pointed to new endeavors for dialogue and understanding among peoples, and for defense of human rights.

Without in anyway minimizing the sufferings of the Jewish people and of the victims of the whole continent of Europe, due to the “ring of criminals who rose to power by false promises of future greatness and the recovery of the nation’s honor and prominence and prosperity, but also through terror and intimidation” (Benedict XVI at Auschwitz), may we take this occasion to recall to mind the similar but wider sufferings of the peoples outside the continent of Europe during the five centuries since 1492.

For a purification of our memories it is necessary to call to mind that while the Nazis are deemed criminals, the military, business, political and even religious leaders of Europe thought of themselves as civilized people when they went to the rest of the world as saviors of the victims of barbaric regimes and people ignorant of God and Christ and hence destined to eternal perdition. They claimed to have a mission of civilization, development and eternal salvation by converting these pagans to Christianity. They thought of themselves as pilgrim people going to lands given to them by God. They went with the force of arms, especially the new gun powder invented in China. They could conquer whole peoples with a handful of adventurers as “Pizarro’s conquest of the Inca Kingdom in Peru and Cortez’s subjugation of the Aztecs in Mexico.”

The conquered territories are robbed of precious metals and raw materials with the aid of fire arms and slavery, and 90% of their inhabitants are killed in the greatest genocide in world history. Pope Alexander VI acts as Supreme Liege Lord for the Spanish and Portuguese Conquistadores. A theology of slavery legitimizes the position of colonialist and capitalists, a state theology legitimizes the royal tribute system, in spite of the opposition of theologians like Las Casa who espoused the cause of the original inhabitants. Robbery and murder of the peoples of America, Africa and Asia is the basis of Europe’s wealth and world leadership.” (Ulrich Duchrow “*Europe in the World System 1492-1992*, WCC publications Geneva, 1992, Thesis 1 p4.

The present distribution of land among the peoples of the world with large areas of temperate lands taken over by European peoples is a result of the continuation of the unjust world order built up by this process. The peoples of much of the rest of the world suffer even today due to this European expansion. They too have their weaknesses and faults, but these do not justify the grave injustice of the present world order. The rush of immigrants to the rich West can be considered as a present day reverse flow from the poor (impoverished) countries. No amount of charity and social service by the affluent West can reverse this disorder which is a fruit of the legitimization of the prevailing world system as legal and guaranteed by the United Nations backed by the superpower domination of the West armed with nuclear weapons.

Christian reflection in this situation must include a purification of memory that looks into the

causes and effects of these actions of the European peoples during the period since 1492. There has to be an analysis of the ideology, theology and spirituality that could inspire such brutality, passing as salvific mission of the Church. A very profound reexamination of the traditional theology that dominated Western Christianity during the 1500 years since 325 must be undertaken. This can help exorcise the traditional and still rather dominant theology of its unacceptable theses that justified such actions as the centuries of anti-Semitism, Crusades, the hunting of witches, the Inquisition and the colonial conquests and setting up of the present unjust world order. It was (is) an exclusivist theology that claimed God to be on the side of the Christians, the chosen people, and eternal salvation to depend on membership of the Church. These teachings were connected with the Christian teaching of the universal fall of the human race into original sin and salvation by the justice of God requiring the death of the only Son for the redemption of humankind. The mission of the Church was understood as linked to the spread of Christian military and political power seen as part of God's providential design of the salvation of humankind.

The Church has not gone through a process of adequately deep self examination to purify itself of such a theology, catechesis and pastoral approaches. Thus while the Pope is deeply moved by the massacres in Europe due to Fascist and Marxist regimes, it is necessary that a further cry goes up to God to ask why such a long period of inhuman cruelty could have been tolerated by the Christian Churches. Many of the Western peoples have not yet seen, in adequate depth, the ideological and theological causes and disastrous results of their world domination of these five centuries.

It may even be asked whether there is not a continuation of the spirit of the Crusades by the super powers of the world in their present "war against terrorism." The search for oil seems to replace the former search for land, gold and resources. There is no moral authority in the world that can restrain the armed aggression of the superpowers in any part of the world, on the assumption that they want to check nuclear proliferation and teach democracy to other peoples. On the positive side there are presently mass demonstrations and strong lobbying against the Iraq war by the peoples movements in many Western countries including the USA and Britain. The institutional Churches could take a clearer stand against war and for settlement of issues by peaceful means.

With deep apprehension we raise these issues and invite the Pope to lead in this reexamination by Christian peoples and powers of their present role in world political and economic relations and military exploits that mark the 21st century. In such historical and present background, aren't the peoples of the rest of the world outside the West, not forgetting their own deficiencies, also entitled to pray, "Rouse Yourself ! Why do you sleep O Lord?"

--Tissa Balasuriya OMI