

The Purification of Memory¹

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WE ARE INVITED by the Holy Father to start the procedure of purifying the memory. Immediately, however, questions arise: What is the meaning of the purification of memory? Is such an endeavor possible? What kind of memory are we speaking about? Let us begin by answering that we are dealing with the memory of history (*mémoire historique*). Then we have to ask: What kind of relation is there between personal memory and the memory of history?

“To purify the memory” includes a verb that implies an action; it presupposes that we have taken hold of our memory, that we are the masters of it. At first, we may be tempted to say that the whole endeavor is an illusion: isn’t it rather our memory that masters us?

I. Forms of Memory

In spite of the criticisms it faces, psychoanalytical doctrine has directed our attention to the phenomenon of unconscious repression. The unconscious is a fact of memory: The recollection of painful and tormenting periods, that the conscious mind cannot stand, are thrown into a state of being forgotten. They are repressed because the state to which they are relegated—which one wishes would lead to their abolition, their destruction—immerses them in a zone of our psyche that is outside the conscious realm. Their existence surfaces through troubles they introduce in our conscious mind. They have an appearance that remains indirect: They do not show up uncovered. They are disguised, camouflaged, to the point of passing unnoticed. Artifices must be used in order to bring them to the surface of the conscious mind.

¹ Translation by Joseph Alobaidi, OP, of “Purification de la mémoire,” *Nova et Vetera* 75 (2000): 33–42.

Such repressed memories are of wounds suffered, generally belonging to the first stage of childhood; the individual does not have the strength to face them. Thus, repression represents a kind of spontaneous self-defense mechanism of someone finding himself powerless. This is why he never fully reaches his goal; the troubles arising from this failure bear witness to the repression. Here, we have not yet reached the realm of ethics.

Referring to the process of repression in the subconscious makes it easy to show the points that enlighten our reflection. Automatism reflex, for example, is typical of certain memory phenomena. We will also maintain the fact that what we forget is not eliminated—Bergson used to say that we forget nothing—but remains in a state of dormancy, with the possibility of being awakened either suddenly or by suggestion.

What has been said does not pertain to all kinds of memories. We have in mind the pages of *Confessions* (X, 6–28) where Augustine describes the vastness of memory in order to illustrate the mystery of the spirit. From the memory of things perceived to the universe of images, then to the universe of ideas, the spirit continues its surprising exploration, which is at the same time the itinerary toward the depth of the human inner self. Hence, the journey of the spirit in the vast expanses of the memory leads to self discovery and, furthermore, to the encounter with God: *et intravi ad ipsius animi mei sedem, quae illi est in memoria mea, quoniam sui quoque meminit animus, nec ibi tu eras . . . ita nec ipse animus es, quia dominus deus animi tu es, et commutantur haec omnia, tu autem incommutabilis manes super omnia et dignatus es habitare in memoria mea, ex quo te didici . . . habitas certe in ea, quoniam tui memini, ex quo te didici, et in ea te invenio, cum recordor te* (XXV, 36).

While progressing in the investigation of these regions of the memory, the spirit grasps itself as an object of its own investigation. This grasping of self does not shut off the spirit, since it remains open to transcendence: *Memoria sui, memoria Dei*. During all this, the soul stays active. It draws forth memories from oblivion by its willed attention. Its creative imagination may freely use images already stored. Finally, and this too is a reason for being amazed, our spirit, helped by memory, masters time to some degree, since it is able to connect in the present what was experienced in the past with what will happen in the future.

Speaking about the first layers of the memory, Augustine notices that animals too have this kind of memory, to which one cannot reduce all the other kinds. The attention, the creation of new images and even the spirit's dynamic are witnesses of freedom's ascendancy over the memory.

II. Forgiveness

This particularity becomes obvious when we enter the field of ethics, which deals precisely with actions that depend on our responsibility. This field also extends to our past actions, which means that we have ascendancy over our memories.

Let us think about remorse and forgiveness. Remorse supposes that I judge differently today an action that I accomplished and judged otherwise yesterday. This remains possible, still, because it is in my power to reconsider the same action according to the requirements of the moral law, present in my conscious. I can confer to it its true moral value. Thus, the same act is present to my conscious with a new qualification, to the point that I wish that I had never committed it. The remorse presumes that the error is recognized as such, with no possibility to suppress it. On the contrary, remorse makes the presence of the error more incisive, more painful.

Remorse, however, may lead to a petition for forgiveness. If by mistake I hurt others, I can make up for the hurt by reparation or another form of compensation. When others assent to my petition for forgiveness, the weight of the guilt-memory becomes lighter.

But the mistake—we are speaking about sin—first of all offends God. That is why it is toward God that the sinner must turn. Here we meet the mighty pardon of God. We know the episode of the Gospel where the paralytic man was healed: “[W]ho but God alone can forgive sins?” (Mk 2:7). The scribes are right. Their mistake is to fail to ask themselves by what right Jesus, who reveals here something of his identity, accords to himself this prerogative.

The forgiveness of sins by God is precisely the highest and most eminent form of the purification of memory. This is because the divine forgiveness really erases and destroys the sin, so that its weight does not burden the conscience anymore. It remains true that the aspect of the sinful act as such that is destroyed is that very aspect that made it sinful, even if the psychological memory of it remains. Therefore, the moral evaluation by which an individual sees his past actions is no longer the same: The sin’s stigma that leads him to suffer does not exist. The individual is freed from it.

There is a great difference between divine and human forgiveness. The man who forgives, imitating his heavenly Father, refrains from considering the offense he received. God, instead, really eradicates the sin.

Thus, in the divine forgiveness, the malice—the moral disorder—that provides the sinful aspect of an act is destroyed, even though the fact, in its materiality, leaves records in the psychological memory. However, and

in the deepest meaning, which is the moral meaning, the memory is truly purified. "Son, your sins are forgiven" (Mk 2:5): The healing that restores the paralytic's ability to move freely is the sign of a deeper liberation; liberation from spiritual paralysis, from the death that sin represents.

III. Memory of History

The previous considerations deal with the memory of a particular person. Our subject is the memory of history, which is a collective memory. Nevertheless, an understanding of personal memory, provided that the right transposition takes place, can still be useful for the understanding of questions pertaining to the memory of history. This notion of the memory of history is collective: It applies to peoples, nations, and groups. In each case, the nature of the subject defines the nature of the memory. I am not going to expand on this point here. However, we should keep it in mind.²

Our reflection has to deal with a specific subject, a subject of the supernatural order: the Church of Christ. What do we mean when we speak about the memory of the Church?

We have to look with faith at the Church and at her memory. It is the words of Jesus himself, in the Gospel according to John, that reveal to us the principle of this memory that is supernatural: "I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the things that are coming. He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you. Everything that the Father has is mine; for this reason I told you that he will take from what is mine and declare it to you" (Jn 16:12–15).

We may notice that the verb "to bear" pertains to the understanding and to the participation in the death and glorification of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is at the very beginning of the living Tradition by which the Word of God, which makes known to us the mystery of salvation and opens our mind, is faithfully kept, explained, and scrutinized in its boundless riches. The same Spirit who inspires the sacred scribes assists the Magisterium of the Church and brings forth the *sensus fidei*.

The living presence of the past, and therefore, of the memory, of the mystery of salvation, takes many forms because of its riches and its fecundity, as it is recalled by the beautiful text of the Council, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 7.

² There is perhaps something similar to the repression of memory in the amnesia regarding the enormity of the crimes committed by the communist regimes. However, other explanations for such behavior are not to be excluded.

Scripture, received in the Tradition, becomes, consequently, the source of an ever-surging light. Sacraments become a source of life. In them, under the action of the Spirit, Christ himself acts and, in so doing, remains present to his Church, in pilgrimage toward the end of time and the fullness of eternal life. It is remarkable that the sacrament in which resides the highest level of Christ's presence is called a memorial.

What is the purpose of this remembering? The memory of the Church, a gift from the Holy Spirit, forcefully calls attention to the dimension of presence, which is typical of memory. Memory does not leave us in the past; it makes the past present and immediate.

IV. The Presence of the Sin

It is to be noticed that in the Gospel according to John that we quoted, the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of truth (Jn 16:13) that leads the disciples to the fullness of the truth. Here we have the principle of the purification of memory.

The sources of living waters that are the word of God and the sacraments do not need to be purified. In order to understand the necessity for purification we have to introduce a new consideration, already expressed in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, which refers to the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*: "The Church, although holy by its incorporation to Christ, never ceases to make penance: It always acknowledges sinners, before God and before men, as its own" (no. 33). In this sense, the constitution *Lumen Gentium* says: "The Church, that has sinners in its midst, at once holy and always in need of purification, advances by way of penance and renewal" (no. 8).

The word of God entrusted to the Church and Christ's gestures that are the sacraments yield fruits of holiness. This is what should normally happen. The Church is holy; her members, however, are sinners. By sin, we remove ourselves from this living stream. The motherly love of the Church makes her do whatever is in her power in order to snatch her sons away from sin and to look after them when they fall. She considers them hers, always, and for them she makes penance. Horrified by sin, she still loves the sinner.

The relation between the Church that is holy and her members that are not, poses a central theological question, which I will mention only briefly at this point. It is a decisive question for understanding the petition for forgiveness and the purification of memory.

It is necessary here to bring up two clarifications. The first deals with the petition for forgiveness. We have to distinguish, foremost, between two aspects of sin. The first is the guilt of the individual who commits

the sinful act. Everyone is accountable before God for his actions. Such a process is strictly personal. It remains possible, of course, in the communion of saints, to pray for the conversion of the sinner. We can pray also in order that “the temporal punishment,” the consequence of the sin, of the contrite and already forgiven sinner may be blotted out.

The guilt, which is the proper responsibility of the sinner because of his sin, remains strictly personal. However, beyond the guilt, which remains always personal, we may consider the sin under another aspect: the nature of the sinful act, which is the opposition to the moral law. Some acts in themselves and in what constitutes them (which presupposes the responsibility of the individual that we spoke about) are against the moral law—such as murder, adultery, and theft. It is at the level of the objective characteristics of the act that the petition for forgiveness and the purification of the memory reside. Furthermore, regardless of the individual responsibility of the perpetrators, who may have been blinded by invincible ignorance, some of these acts are serious obstacles to the testimony and the mission of the Church. *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* speaks of the sins of Christians who offered to the world “not the testimony of a life inspired by the values of faith, but ways of thinking and behaving that truly were forms of counter-testimony and scandal” (no. 33).

The Church has the mission of proclaiming the Gospel. Testimony is the basis for such proclamation. The behavior of some Christians acts directly against this.

The second clarification pertains to the Church as subject that spans the centuries, unchanged and stronger than the erosion of time: The Church has the promise of life everlasting. Here, a first distinction becomes evident: Not every action accomplished by a Christian may be attributed to the Church as subject. This is the case when the Christian behaves as part of the temporal city. One must be aware of how various actions accomplished by Christians may or may not be attributed to the Church. Each action should be analyzed according to its own situation.

There is another problem, though, that I want to emphasize. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 8, indicates that the Church is an elaborate reality, made of double elements: human and divine. Thus, in the light of a remarkable (*non mediocris*) analogy, she could be paralleled to the mystery of the incarnate Verb who uses, like an instrument, the human nature that he incorporated. “In the same way, the society as a whole that constitutes the Church is at the service of the Holy Spirit of Christ who gives her life for the growth of the body.” There is indeed an analogy: By virtue of the hypostatic union, the humanity of Jesus is totally and flawlessly holy. In the Church, however, that which is human remains subject to frailty and

weaknesses. Until now, we envisaged the paradox of the Church's holiness, received from God, and her members who are sinners. We must somehow continue our analysis.

The Church, existing within history, receives from human society goods that are true cultural acquisitions.³ It also happens that she receives institutions modeled on those of human civil society, with procedures that conceal in various ways the evangelical aspect of her mission. Apart from the shortcomings themselves, one must consider the imperfections and solutions in history, which are marked by an "all-too-human" burden.

It is in this perspective that the Council decree regarding ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, mentions the call for perpetual reform (*perennis reformatio*) pushed by this renewal, which is nothing less than the Church's being more faithful to her vocation, a great momentum that pushes the Church toward the fullness of the Kingdom, which will be given to her in eternity (no. 6). That is why it has been said in *Dei Verbum* that "while the centuries pass, the Church constantly advances toward the fullness of the divine truth, until the words of God are accomplished in her" (no. 8).

It is in such a vision of the Church that the purification of memory could be understood. The Augustinian expression *memoria sui*, *memoria Dei* applies to the Church as a subject, who receives her living unity from the Holy Spirit. However, the words' order is reversed: It is the *memoria Dei* that enlightens the *memoria sui*, whose meaning is close to the old meaning of "become what you are," become always more faithfully, more perfectly conformed to the One who is your Head, whose Body you are.

Dealing with the treasure that is entrusted to her, the word of God and the sacraments, it remains in her. Its presence is intact and always new: *Memoria Dei*. In other words: *Memoria Christi*. Sure of her indefectible faithfulness, which is a gift from God, the Church, in the act of *memoria sui*, looks truthfully at her own history, where human aspects intrude with their imperfection, along with the sins of her children. When it comes to examining these aspects, the Spirit of truth, who leads the Church to scrutinize more and more intensely the mystery in the depth of her being, allows her at the same time to have a critical judgment about her past, a critical judgment that becomes more and more refined in conformity with her own essence. The knowledge of herself as the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, gives her the points of reference and the criteria that allow her to appreciate the institutions, the practices and the actions that marked her progression in history. This remains true, evidently, of her past as well as of her present.

³ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 44.

Here, we are thinking about an institution like the inquisition. The first objective, which is to defend the integrity of the faith of God's people against harmful errors, is something inscribed in the pastoral vocation of the Church. It is the implementation of this very objective that, from two points of view, poses a problem. First, we must take note of the context: Christendom, that is, a political society whose citizens are Christians and that, in itself, is concerned with the unity of the faith. Second—it is at this level that a critical judgment must be exercised—the Church's institutions set up a series of procedures that belong to civil tribunals. The death penalty was a common practice. Its form, being burned at the stake, horrifies us. There was no hesitation at using torture in order to obtain confessions of guilt. Some time later, the Protestant Reformation did not change matters. Soon after that, the Treaty of Westphalia made things worse in opening the way to the truth of the State.

Thus the purification of memory pertains to judgment. It is the fruit of the critical reading that she makes of her own history, enlightened by the Gospel, whose riches, specificity, and demands she ponders continually. This judgment, a consequence of her quest for the truth, leads her to ask God for forgiveness, in the name of his children, who are either sinners or are so lethargic that they cannot read the signs of times. At the same time, she asks forgiveness from men, too. Not because, while facing them, she is as if sitting before a tribunal; rather, the memory of errors and imperfections erect in their way a barrier that keeps them from reaching the word of salvation to which they are entitled.

It should go without saying that by "critical judgment" I intend the original meaning of the expression "discernment," without any connotation of the intention of denial or suspicion. "Krisis," from which come "critic" and "criterion," means, first of all, "judgment." Thus, "critical judgment" means judgment exercised in light of the criteria of the truth of the Gospel.

Before concluding I want briefly to raise an objection that is often made to the idea of the purification of memory. It is an objection issued in various ways by certain circles and schools of thought, generally independently of one another, that all have in common the concept of what we may call "mentality." This objection would say that an invitation to the purification of memory becomes a gross anachronism. It is a fact that we partake in our own age's mentality. No one, the strongest personalities included, totally escapes this fact. That is why it is right to examine the concept of mentality. Let us say that "mentality" is the sum of ideas received in a passive and unchecked manner, in a certain time by a society or by a particular group. These ideas are not investigated by reason,

because they seem obvious, as if they are self-evident. They encounter no objection or particular difficulty. They are indisputable because they are believed to be so. Hence, a certain number of unquestioned judgments are passed to us through education, others by social mimesis, still others by force of public opinion.

The question remains whether everything that individuals think in a determined time and a specific society is enclosed in the mentality. It is also true that a mentality is not so strong that it eliminates critical revision, and that there are universal values that transcend epochs and particular societies. This is the case especially for ethical values, in spite of their tendency toward commands and particular forbiddances.

They were called prejudices at the time of Enlightenment. They presumably belonged to the past; the light of reason would disperse them forever. Today, however, it seems that we are deep in the opposite tendency: All is prejudice, because everything is radically determined by the time and place. In ethics, this leads to relativism.

If we have to examine this dimension of social life, its mentality, it is because it forms the basis for many objections to the idea of asking forgiveness and the purification of memory.

The first objection results from methodic scruple. It is provoked by historians who aim at the restitution of the past by referring facts, behaviors, and events to the ideological context of the epoch, and refraining from any value judgment. My answer to this is that the study of the history of facts constitutes an indispensable step that preserves us from anachronism. Being conscious of the complexity of situations is an advantage that we have because of the discipline of history. However, the latter, because of its methodological presuppositions, is probably incapable of providing the last word about history. For our subject, the philosopher's and the theologian's opinion of history are necessary. Objections by historians—rather, by some historians—should be examined from the epistemological point of view. It is more difficult to understand clearly the objections that themselves proceed from a relativist mentality, inspiring, without discernment, surveys, and opinion polls. Those who find in their changing features the marks of the Spirit will ultimately be able to justify anything: “to each, his own truth.”

Finally there are the theoretical justifications of relativism that do not necessarily negate moral values, but attribute them to no moral, psychological, or social origin. A good example can be seen in the (now old) book by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Ethics and Moral Science* (*La morale et la science des mœurs*). According to this disciple of Durkheim, moral imperatives do not refer to a transcendental source; they are the individual expression of

“social pressure.” Hence, speaking of the science of behaviors, one confirms the immanence of moral values in the society, together with the fact that they prevail over individuals. Clearly in this perspective, the idea of the purification of memory bears no meaning. History offers a spectrum of many moralities. One morality follows on the other just as epochs and societies do.

We say that the *science of behavior* or sociology cannot replace philosophy or moral theology. It can be a precious addition that allows the moral theologian to be aware of the function of social pressures and of the existence of prejudices, which are still at a pre-moral level but can strongly induce moral choices. He will become aware, as well, of the venues of the transmission of moral values, like imitation or the influence of role models.

I want, however, to highlight two decisive factors pertaining to our problem that underline the relation between morality and history. The first is the slow maturation in time before being conscious of the implications and the aftereffects of the demands of the moral life. I express the second factor by the term “constellation.” In a more or less explicit way, certain fundamental values of morality are recognized in different epochs. What changes is their articulation, with this or that value being given priority over another. I cannot expand further on this point here, but it is nevertheless important. Thus, what was essential for the generations of Christendom was defending the truth, which was a concern both of the civil society and of the Church. The question of the means employed for this defense was put aside.

Should we say that our time is marked by the eclipse of the sense of the truth? Relativism is certainly widespread. However, a deeper analysis leads one to think that in the present constellation of values, what occupies the first place is the appropriation of the truth by an act that attests to both the transcendence and the freedom of the person. The truth is fully honored when it imposes itself on a freedom that finds its fulfillment in its vital acceptance, decisive for its destiny. It seems to me that this is the message of *Dignitatis Humanae*. This is what gives the purification of memory its highest rationale.

Many men and women have been victimized by brutal methods that constituted an insult to the causes they were intended to serve. These men and women have the right to our respect and *pietas*.⁴

⁴ For further discussion, see Georges Cottier, OP, *Mémoire et repentance: pourquoi l'Eglise demande pardon*, preface by Cardinal Roger Etchegaray (Parole et Silence: Paris, 1998).