

POPE LETTER

Greater than Sin

There would be much to discuss about the events that led Benedict XVI to write his *Letter to the Catholics of Ireland*, and we could do this by starting from the facts, the numbers, and the data which, if looked at attentively, reveal a reality much less enormous than appears from the ferocious media campaign. Or we could start from the contradictions of those who, in the same newspaper, denounce certain wicked deeds, but after a few pages justify everything and everybody, especially in matters of sex. We could do this, and perhaps it would help to understand the context of a Church really under attack, whatever its errors may be. Only the Pope's humble and courageous gesture pointed attention toward the heart of the question.

Clearly there is a wound, a very serious one, one of the kind that provoked Christ (and his vicars, too) to use fiery words ("Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea").

There is filth in the Church. Joseph Ratzinger himself said so during the Way of the Cross at the Coliseum five years ago, shortly before being elected Pope and, realistically, he has never stopped recalling the fact since. Sin is there, grave sin. Evil is there, along with the abyss of pain that evil carries with it, and everything possible has to be done, and with firmness, to stem the evil and to make amends for that pain. The Pope is already doing this, and his letter reiterates it strongly when it asks the guilty to "answer for it before Almighty God and before properly constituted tribunals."

This is precisely why the true heart of the question, the forgotten focus, lies elsewhere. Alongside all the limitations and within the Church's wounded humanity, is there or is there not something greater than sin, something *radically* greater than sin? Is there something that can shatter the inexorable weight of our evil? Something that, as the Pope writes, "has the power to forgive even the greatest of sins, and to bring forth good even from the most terrible evil"?

"This is the point: God was moved by our nothingness," Fr. Giussani said in the phrase quoted on the CL Easter Poster. "Not only that. God was moved by our betrayal, by our crude, forgetful, and treacherous poverty, by our pettiness... It's compassion, pity, passion. He had pity on me." This is what the Church brings to the world, and certainly not

because of its members' merit, goodness, or even less because of their coherence: God's compassion for our pettiness, something greater than our limitations, the only thing infinitely greater than our limitations. If we don't start from here, we cannot understand at all; everything goes mad, literally.

We, too, have had moments when we have dodged that compassion, and run away from it. At times, it is in the Church itself that faith is reduced to ethics and morality is reduced to an impossible lonely recourse to laws, as if the need of that embrace were something to be ashamed of. But if we forget Christ, if we do away with the wholly different measure that He introduces into the world now, *through* the Church, then we no longer have the terms on which to judge the Church.

Then it becomes easy to mistake attention for the victims and regard for their history for a conniving silence, and prudence toward the guilty parties, true or presumed – perhaps accused on the basis of rumors emerging after decades – for the will to “cover up” (sadly it has sometimes been the case). Then it is almost inevitable to keep arguing about celibacy without even touching on the real value of virginity. And it becomes impossible to understand why the Church can be hard and motherly at the same time with the priests who go wrong. It can punish them severely and ask them to serve their sentence and make amends for the evil (it has already done so in the past, and will always do so), but without snapping, if possible, that thread that binds them, because it is the only thing that can redeem them. It can ask its children to “be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect, not so as to demand of them an impossible irreprehensibility, but so as to remind them of a tension to live the same mercy with which God embraces us (“be merciful as your heavenly father is merciful”).

This is why the Church can educate, which, in the end, is the real question being challenged by those who are accusing it (“See, even the priests do wrong, and badly wrong. How can we trust them with our children?”) as if the Church's being teacher all depended on the behavior of her children, and not on Christ, on that presence which – amidst all the errors and horrors committed – makes possible in the world an embrace like that of Chagall's Prodigal Son which appears on the Easter Poster. There, alongside Fr. Giusani's phrase, there is another, by Benedict XVI: “Conversion to Christ ultimately means this: to exit the illusion of self-sufficiency in order to discover and accept one's own need – the need of His forgiveness and His friendship.”

This is the embrace of Christ, in our wounded and needy humanity, far greater than the evil we can do. If the Church, with all its limitations, had not this to offer to the world, even to the victims of those barbarities, then we would be lost. Because the evil would still be there, but it would be impossible to overcome it.