

## Point VIII. Ancient Institutional evils

The present representatives of the institutions that have prevailed through History, certainly have no responsibility for actions which took place in the past, since they were not alive then. But, in order to promote peace, these representatives should nevertheless publicly state their regrets for past evils and injustices committed by the institutions throughout History, when it is prudent to do so. In their institutional roles they should try to compensate for the damage caused.

Point VIII asserts vehemently what has been discussed in Point I: the people of today are not guilty or responsible for what happened before our time, precisely because we did not exist then.

Human life is limited by its beginning since we did not exist before our conception. It is also limited by its end since the responsible parties for the good and evil events of History cease to exist. It is out of our reach to personally reproach or pay homage to those who existed before us.

As human beings we are personally accountable for the deeds we participate in during our existence once we had use of reason. The word responsibility derives from *responsa*, which means: response, ability to respond, to face up to one's actions as an individual or as part of a group. Therefore, we are not responsible for deeds that occurred before our existence.

Historian Carlos Martínez Shaw<sup>1</sup> addresses three fundamental questions in his annotation of the Letter of Peace:

“Are there instances we have inherited from the past where we must assume certain co-responsibility? Are we heirs to the deeds of the family, History, or the native land, which makes us co-responsible to such deeds? Or are they mere abstractions which link us to ties of that nature?”

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<sup>1</sup> C. MARTÍNEZ SHAW, “*Conocer el pasado. Construir el futuro*” en J.Rigol y Otros *Convivencia en siglo XXI: La Carta de la Paz*. Barcelona, 1995. p. 100.

To begin, it can be openly said: "I did not kill any Amerindian, I did not enslave any African, and I did not drop any atomic bomb". That is why I can not consider myself responsible for any of these huge historical tragedies.

In a sense, I could be guilty if I adhere to those historical conducts neglecting to consider them wrongful. In addition I decide that under the same circumstances I would act the same way. In that manner the responsibility for the events of the past exists as we reaffirm and endorse the events of the past. For example, if we declare ourselves as Neo-Nazis, we revive that ideology and approve the evil deeds committed by Nazis of the past".

Nevertheless, some human deeds surpass their creators' brief lives. Art, Literature, and Architecture have given us many examples of this. Humanistic and scientific discoveries, from which we have benefited in spite of our little if any merit in them, also surpass their creators. The great cultural legacy we enjoy requires a healthy and realistic assessment of the enormous number of realities inherited from our ancestors and from which we benefit and enjoy each day.

### **The Institutions**

The human being has invented the institutions. These institutions or instruments of service generally outlast man. To achieve many long term objectives the existence of said institutions and their prevalence throughout History is essential.

There are many types of institutions such as: private, public, family, social etc. Let's think about corporations, the family, associations, clubs, universities, libraries, monarchies, magistrates, religious institutions, political groups, banks, city councils, and many others that serve us. A great part of our life is developed on the support we receive from these institutions.

These institutions have objectives and statutes that dictate their desired behaviors, and as all that is human they may contain errors. In addition, human beings manage institutions; therefore they are capable of doing good as well as bad. This can apply to all who compose the institution and as a result become responsible as well.

If the desire for peace is genuine, institutions can not be extolled or deified as if they had never committed errors or acts of wickedness. History is filled with errors committed by institutions.

Nonetheless, since institutions lack the capacity to exercise moral responsibilities they are unable to request forgiveness. What is proper of them is the acknowledgement of their mistakes. In this point, the Letter of Peace states:” to favor peace, current representatives must publicly regret the acts of wickedness and injustices committed by these institutions throughout History.” Therefore, to consolidate peace one can’t lie or conceal historical responsibilities.

“It is the case of symbolic gestures where old external and internal conflicts are attempted to be closed. Such was the case of Spain’s King Juan Carlos I on his visit to William of Orange’s tomb in Delft, Holland. His visit served to symbolize the abolition of the divisions that existed between the Dutch and Spaniard communities during the XVI century, so that the Dutch and Spaniard communities of today may live in peace. Pope John Paul II asks forgiveness for all of the Church’s past errors. His action symbolizes how a perennial institution of divine origins such as the Church vows to assess their errors of the past and to peacefully rectify any erroneous conducts in the present.”<sup>2</sup>

### **The Revision of the Past and Its Usefulness**

It is wise to revise historical events. However, since we are not angels, these revisions must be made cautiously. Just as the Letter of Peace suggests we must publish the results of these investigations whenever prudent, there by avoiding new disagreements.

Revising the past may yield the following three outcomes:

1. A cordial and humble act of historical justice where an institution pleads for forgiveness would erase many invisible barriers among the living today. This act of historical justice would promote a better and more fraternal understanding, more friendship and solidarity in the desire to share a better future which becomes more common to all.
2. Compensate as much as possible the harm caused by institutions of the past. If the members of a given institution presently enjoy benefits that derive from unjust actions carried out in the past it is only fair that they compensate those that were harmed or offended in an adequate manner. This becomes a useful value in the quest for peace. An example of this is the current pacts and special clauses between those that oppressed and the oppressed during a certain period in History.

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<sup>2</sup> Op. cit. p. 107

3. It is easier to debate the responsible parties of deeds that occurred prior to us due to the lesser emotional involvement that exists, (even after contemplating the limitations Historical Science may show). This may lead to achieve pacts regarding the deeds of the past. That is why we must begin by revising that which happened before our time. It is easier to establish the blame for recent events because they are fresher and more precise in our memory. Emotions, sensitivities, and personal suspicions are too deeply rooted to allow for either party to meet the other halfway. Pride, fear, and personal insecurities propel participants of a debate to remain intolerant of opinions different to theirs, which results in a terrible lack of agreements.

Furthermore, this third outcome has another consequence. It is similar to the popular Spanish idiom: "I tell you John, so you will tell Peter". The event of recognizing that an institution of yesteryear made mistakes hints on the fact that similar mistakes can occur in the present. This creates cracks in the false security we tend to project when we act as an institution. Dogmatism becomes more aware of actions; in doing so it fosters improved actions in today's institutions.

In an effort to prevent the revision of historical deeds from provoking new confrontations it is wise to recall that had History been different, for better or worse, we would not exist (Point IV). The philosophical acceptance of historical deeds as they occurred is the best way to study History from an ethical point of view and possibly settle any responsibilities of institutions of the present. Certainly, truth lays the foundation for peace.

"The past, as a fixed piece of information, can not be rectified, yet we may try to rectify its effects we identify as destructive to community life. We are unable to annul the historical process involving the creation of the large estates in Andalucia. However, we can introduce new mechanisms that will enable better distributions of the land. The Church's condemnation of Galileo during the XVII century can not be negated. Yet, the Church recognized the truth in the heliocentric theory and declared itself *a disciple of the masters of science* during the XX century."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Op. cit. p. 107