

By **RICHARD BOUDREAUX**

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VATICAN CITY — In a landmark public confession, Pope John Paul II begged God's forgiveness Sunday for sins committed or condoned by Roman Catholics over the last 2,000 years, including sexism, racism, hatred of Jews and violence in defense of the Catholic faith.

The pope listed or alluded to a wide range of victims of Catholic hostility, prejudice and indifference as he asked his church to enter its third millennium with a purified conscience. These victims included heretics, Protestants, Jews and other non-Christians, immigrants, ethnic minorities, women, abused children and the unborn.

"We forgive and ask forgiveness," John Paul said several times during his solemn Day of Pardon Mass in St. Peter's Basilica, a crowning moment of a 21-year-old papacy that has made repentance a central theme. It was the first call by any pope for such a sweeping pardon for past and present wrongs.

The initiative was welcomed inside and outside the billion-member church as a bold, exemplary appeal for soul-searching and reconciliation. Some critics said it didn't go far enough; Jewish leaders voiced regret that it didn't condemn the Vatican's silence on the Holocaust during World War II.

John Paul faulted no Catholic leader, past or present. He mentioned no sinner by name, explaining that only God can judge individual responsibility.

A key passage of his homily defended the church as "a wonderful wealth of holiness, of missionary ardor, of total dedication to Christ and to our neighbor," but acknowledged that "some of our brothers have been unfaithful to the Gospel."

Their failings, he said, were especially glaring "in the second millennium"--a period covering the holy wars of the Crusades, the executions of heretics and other non-Catholics by courts of the Inquisition, and the forced conversions of native peoples in Africa and the Americas.

Without specifying those bloody chapters, John Paul added: "We ask forgiveness for the divisions among Christians, for the use of violence that some Christians have committed in the service of the truth and for the attitudes of mistrust and hostility sometimes assumed toward followers of other religions."

Turning to contemporary sins, he asked Catholics to reflect on their responsibility for secularism, ethical relativism, violations of the right to life, indifference to poverty and "other evils that disfigure the face of the church."

The 79-year-old pontiff was dressed in heavy purple robes, the color symbolizing penitence. He was conveyed through the packed basilica on a wheeled platform and read his homily with trembling hands, a symptom of Parkinson's disease, while leaning heavily on his silver staff.

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Five cardinals and two bishops took turns lighting a candelabrum as they alternated with him in confessing seven broad categories of sins. With all seven candles burning on the altar, John Paul embraced a 15th century crucifix in a sign of reverence and penitence.

The Mass, on the first Sunday of Lent, came eight days before John Paul's scheduled departure for a week's visit to Jerusalem and the Holy Land--another highlight of his Holy Year ritual of passage to the new millennium.

Jewish leaders watched the Mass closely, some expecting implicit criticism of the wartime pope, Pius XII, whose failure to publicly denounce the Nazi slaughter of Jews remains a contested issue between them and the Vatican.

But the Holocaust was not mentioned. Instead, Cardinal Edward Cassidy recalled the "sufferings of the people of Israel" and asked divine pardon for "the sins committed by not a few [Catholics] against the people of the Covenant."

After a moment of silent prayer, the pope responded, "We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and asking your forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood."

"It is deeply disappointing that the subject of the Holocaust was not dealt with in the papal homily, all the more so since John Paul witnessed it directly," said Yisrael Meir Lau, a Holocaust survivor who is chief rabbi of Ashkenazi Jews in Israel. Lau, like the pope, is from Poland.

Other Jewish leaders welcomed Cassidy's words as a challenge to previous Vatican suggestions that relatively few Catholics sinned against the Jews during the Nazi era. An aide to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak said John Paul's general apology will improve the climate for next week's papal visit and make Jewish leaders more receptive to interfaith dialogue.

"This statement is powerful, historical; it talks about a new world order, about understanding," said Rabbi Steven B. Jacobs of the Kol Tikvah Temple in Woodland Hills. "Some may feel that the pope didn't go far enough, but there are internal [Vatican] politics that we should have nothing to say about."

Indeed, some Vatican officials think John Paul went too far in his six previous mea culpas on specific historical wrongs. Just one other pope, Paul VI, who reigned until 1978, has repented for the sins of Catholics, but only with the aim of reconciling them with other branches of Christianity.

The Vatican aired some of its misgivings this month in a theological document previewing Sunday's apology. To some, it said, John Paul's approach has enhanced the credibility of church pronouncements; to others, it has undermined the church by appearing to concede ground to "those who are hostile" to it. John Paul's sweeping confession, said Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, must not be read "as a form of spectacular self-flagellation."

John Paul is apologizing for sins committed by the church's "sons and daughters," the theological document said, not by the church itself, which is "holy and immaculate."

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Sunday's long list was divided into categories: sins "in the service of truth," sins against Christian unity, sins against Jews, sins against other religions and cultures, sins against women and the unity of the human race, sins against individual rights, and sins in general.

"Given the number of sins committed in the course of 20 centuries, [the list] must necessarily be rather summary," said Bishop Piero Marini, who was in charge of the ceremony.

Cardinal Francis Arinze, lighting his candle at the altar, offered a prayer "for women, who are all too often humiliated and marginalized." Cardinal Xavier Nguyen Van followed with an apology to "minors who are victims of abuse [and] the unborn killed in their mother's womb or even exploited for experimental purposes by those who abuse the promise of biotechnology."

Another passage singled out Gypsies, one of the few minorities mentioned by name Sunday, as examples of "the weakest members of society," who often fall victim to Catholics' "desire to dominate others."

"Future generations are going to look back at this as a turning point in relations between Catholics and many other groups," said Father Thomas J. Reese, a Jesuit theologian and editor of America magazine in New York. "Prejudices and hatreds are passed on from generation to generation until finally a generation says, 'No, this will not continue.' This is what the pope wants to say as part of the Holy Year."

Catholic leaders around the world have been offering their own Holy Year pleas for pardon, some touching issues the pope avoided Sunday.

For example, the archbishop of Los Angeles, Cardinal Roger M. Mahony, confessed last week to a host of church failings, including sexual misconduct by priests and insensitivity to homosexual and divorced Catholics. Bishops in Germany and France have said the church as an institution didn't do enough to save Jews from the Nazis.

Hans Kung, a Swiss theologian, said it was "misleading" for John Paul to repent without citing the failings of popes and bishops, including his own. Banned since 1979 from teaching at Catholic institutions for challenging papal primacy, Kung said he is the victim of an ongoing inquisition by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith that still "burns people, not physically but psychologically."

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of that Vatican agency, admitted from the altar Sunday that "even men of the church, in the name of faith and morals, have sometimes used methods not in keeping with the Gospel in the solemn duty of defending the faith." He did not elaborate.

Times staff writer Tracy Wilkinson in Jerusalem contributed to this report.