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THE DAY OF PARDON
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Last week we watched Pope John Paul II visit the Holy Land and the sacred sites associated with the life and death of Jesus. The Pope's words and actions attracted attention because of his strong moral authority, which belies his lack of political power. But perhaps this Pope's most important act happened before he even left the Vatican.

On March 11, the Pope celebrated the Day of Pardon in which he and Church officials led Catholic Christians in asking forgiveness for the wrongs Christians committed during the past two millennia. This act of repentance stands as unique in the history of the Church and, like Vatican II, will bring about significant changes in the modern Church. Indeed, the Pope believes that the Day of Pardon will have ramifications in both the human and divine realms.

In the human realm, the Church's act of repentance constitutes the first step in a two-step process. In Catholic theology, the act of sinning is seen in two parts: the deed itself, and the impact of that deed on others. A person's true regret of a sin thus must address the sin and its impact. If one person slanders another, for instance, then they should not only ask forgiveness for speaking the slander, but should also take steps to restore the reputation of the person slandered.

The Day of Pardon constitutes the first of these two steps on behalf of the deeds committed in the Church's name over the past two millennia. By repenting, the Church divorces itself from the sins of the past. It indicates that the Church today does not approve of them, regrets the actions, and wishes they had not happened. This is a liberating action, for the Church no longer has to defend those wrongful deeds and can join with others in condemning them and repudiating them.

This liberation is a liberation to responsibility, however. For now the second step must be performed, that of making amends -- of taking steps to put things right and to erase (or at least lessen) the impact of those sins in our world today. Thus the Day

of Pardon sets in motion a process of seeking reconciliation with those harmed by past deeds, a process that will take decades to conclude. It begins a period of introspection and reform in order to bring about the internal changes necessary to accomplish that reconciliation.

The enormity of the task becomes clear when we note that the apologies were organized by types of sins, rather than by listing specific incidents. But the categories of people harmed include women, other Christians, the Jews, people of other cultures, religions and races, as well as those whose fundamental human rights have been abused. Given that the apologia was intended to cover 2,000 years of history, this ensured that little was left out, even though no incident was mentioned specifically.

To effect true reconciliation with all these groups seems beyond human accomplishment, but the Pope looks heavenward for divine assistance. For the Pope sees this repentance in millennial terms. Repentance, especially in this special jubilee year, brings the Kingdom of God ever closer and "anticipates the new heavens and the new earth." God Himself will strengthen human weakness to bring about His plan. As John Paul himself said in his Lenten Message, "history bears within itself a seed of good which the Lord will cause to germinate in its fullness. (Christians)...face the challenges and expectations of the future in the confident certainty which is born of faith in the Lord's promise." Thus the Day of Pardon, the Pope believes, provides the opening act of a human and divine drama which will play for years and decades to come.