

In the last two months, the issue of apologies by international institutions and organizations and by national and regional governments has evoked intense discourse and passion. The very definition of apology generates deep divisions across the globe and within nations.

The dictionary definition of apology is "an expression of regret for wrongdoing an... excuse or defence." The Thesaurus relates apology to vindication, penitence and atonement. Each interpretation emphasizes acceptance of wrongdoing and infers some form of making up for it.

At the United Nations World Conference on Racism in Durban in September 2000, some African governments and NGOs wanted an apology for slavery and colonialism. Other African Americans wanted acknowledgement that the trans-Atlantic trade was a crime against humanity and demanded reparation as compensation. The African governments considered that an apology. While desirable, it was not as important as an increase in European investment and trade in Africa. The European ex-colonial countries were reluctant to apologize for the slave trade because of fear of liability for compensation. Their position was to accept that the slave trade was deeply regrettable but not to apologize or to agree that it was a crime against humanity.

About seventy years after Japan began the brutal colonization of Korea, followed by conquest and oppressive occupation, Japan finally apologized to Korea earlier this month. The Japanese Prime minister, on a historic visit to South Korea, apologized for Japanese aggression and abuse of the Korean people. I do not know whether Japan has accepted to pay the compensation which Korea has long demanded. Earlier this year, Japan had issued a formal apology to China for its invasion of that country in 1937 and subsequent bloody occupation until the end of the Second World War. These apologies mean that Japan has accepted, belatedly, its responsibility for the war in China and Korea. Perhaps, henceforth, Japanese school history textbooks will be rewritten to present the truth about Japanese militarism from 1931 to 1945.

Pope John Paul II has dedicated his papacy to righting the wrong of the Catholic Church. The crimes committed in the past by the method of the first church is to offer an apology to try to seek restitution for the future. The Pope has apologized to the Jews and the Muslims for their persecution by the church and has committed the Vatican to spearhead inter-faith dialogue and the betterment of relations with the other two monotheistic religions.

Recently, Pope John Paul II, over the Internet, apologized to the people of the Island of Oceania for the damage done to their culture and society by Catholic missionaries. Three years earlier, the Catholic bishops from Oceania met in the Pope Vatican and submitted to the Pope their report on the injustice committed by the missionaries. The report states that the Pope wishes to convey this apology in person, but his ill-health and fragility made such an exhausting trip impossible but because he considered the apology so important, the Pope took the revolutionary from Sydney. The message was retransmitted on a huge screen to the Pacific Island. The Pope also expressed an apology to all the victims of sexual abuse at the hand of Catholic priests and church

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Season of Apologies

workers. A recently publicized case has demonstrated that the Catholic Church no longer conceal and covers up the far too many cases of sexual abuses by its priests. The church has belatedly accepted responsibility for the crimes committed by its servants. In Australia, the ancient indigenous people, the Aborigine, is still waiting for an apology from the Australian government for the centuries of oppression and discrimination. The protestant church in Australia apologized to the Aborigines; I am not aware that the Catholic Church in Australia has yet done so. If not, perhaps the Pope may consider extending his apology to the people of Oceania, to the Australian indigenous. The Australian Prime Minister, John Harvard, is adamant in his refusal to apologize for the acts of the past which he and his government bear no responsibility for. Yet despite the granting of the land right to the aborigines and some development projects, there is no doubt that aborigines continue to endure political, economic, social

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discrimination and marginalization. An apology would offer symbolic restitution for the past and inspire confidence in a better future for the Aborigines.

In Nigeria, recently, several apologies have been demanded, and another offered then regretted. *Ohaeneze*, in its submission to the Oputa panel, has demanded an apology from the Nigerian government for the state-sponsored pogroms in the Northern region in 1966, directed primarily against Igbo residents in the North. The group has also demanded an apology— and reparation—for the civil war and the consequent suffering of the Igbo people. The tiny community of Odi in Rivers State, supported by many human rights organizations, is demanding an apology from the federal government for the killing of innocent civilians by soldiers sent to Odi after a police unit was attacked and several policemen killed. The response of the federal government to those demands is a deafening silence.

The scenario is different, however, in the recent resurgence of violent inter-ethnic conflicts in several Middle belt states. A few days after the Tiv militia murdered 19 soldiers who were sent to the Benue-Taraba border to keep the peace, Governor George Akume of Benue State publicly apologized to the federal government and people of Nigeria over the tragic incident.

The apology was ignored by the federal government which moved its troops into Tiv occupied areas of Benue State. Governor Akume

publicly announced that he regretted apologizing to the federal government. He said he believes his apology infuriated the federal government even more and was responsible for the reprisal. Given the conflicting statement over responsibility for authorizing the military action from within the federal government and the affected state government, it is difficult to assess the validity of Akume's interpretation. What is clear is the motive and political power of a public apology.

An apology is owed to the resident of Oyinkan Abayomi Drive (formerly Queen's Drive) Ikoyi by the owners of the generator parked outside the building which houses the U.S guest house/club. The generator has been parked there for weeks. Initially, residents thought it was broken down and awaited removal, but it is frequently turned on, emitting its fumes and noise onto the drive. Surely there is a by-law prohibiting generators on the pavement. Further along Oyinkan Abayomi Drive, opposite Adeyemi Street and next to British Airways, an open space has been converted into a motor park, mini-market and bukateria.

The only open space left in Ikoyi is on the Oyinkan Abayomi Drive-foreshore on Five Cowries Creek. Apart from the one just mentioned, the remaining undeveloped spaces have notices declaring that the land belongs to the Inland Waterway Authority. Is this a federal or state body? Readers, please advise. Did we hope that this authority will preserve the foreshore? With the uncontrolled construction going on along the Victoria Island side of the foreshore (along Ozumba Mbadiwe Road), it is getting more and more difficult to even see the lagoon and creek. I can envisage a time when an entrepreneur will set up a stall, tucked away behind a driveway, equipped with a telescope, at which people will queue to pay to look at the lagoon.

As George Bernard Shaw pontificated: "Do not do unto others as you would they should do unto you; their taste may not be the same." The following true story illustrates the wisdom of Shaw's dictum. An official brought the Chief Rabbi before the court of the inquisition and told him "we will leave the fate of your people to God. I am putting two slips of paper in this box. On one is written Guilty, on the other is written Innocent, Draw."

Now, this inquisitor was known to seek the slaughter of all the Jews, and he had written Guilty on both pieces of paper. The Rabbi put his hand inside the box, withdrew the slip and swallowed it. "What are you doing?" cried the inquisitor. "How will the court know what is on the slip," said the Rabbi. "Examine the slip that's in the box. If it reads innocent, then the paper I swallowed obviously must have read Guilty." If it was swallowed, it must have read Innocent."

Has the Spanish government or the Catholic Church ever apologized for the crimes of the Spanish Inquisition?