

## **POPE'S CHANGE OF DIRECTION: PARDON US!**

### **The Pope in Moravia Makes a Historic Gesture**

by Luigi Accattoli

The Catholic Church builds a bridge to the Protestants.

OLOMOUC, Czech Republic. -"Today, I, the Pope of the Roman Church, in the name of all Catholics, ask forgiveness for all the wrongs inflicted on non-Catholics in the course of the turbulent history of these peoples, and at the same time I ensure them of the forgiveness of the Catholic Church for the wrongs suffered by her faithful."

Important words, which will enter history books. They were pronounced yesterday morning in Olomouc in Moravia, while speaking about the local religious wars, which lasted more than two hundred years: from the execution of Jan Hus in 1415 to the middle of the seventeenth century.

Everyone killed in the name of Christ. With each victory the people were forced to change faith, until the definite imposition of the Catholic Church in all of Bohemia and Moravia. And this was evident in Prague on Saturday. The Pope was welcomed coldly and the Hussite Church refused to meet with him. But, characteristically, he had a ready answer, this time using a formula for forgiveness that has no precedent in the history of papal pronouncements regarding other Christian churches.

The acknowledgement of errors fits in with the plan for the Year 2000 Jubilee. But the 'extra surprise' yesterday was due to the latest controversy with the disciples of Jan Hus: they did not go to meet him Saturday in Prague out of protest against his decision to canonize a seventeenth century priest (Jan Sarkander, 1576 - 1620), whom the Protestants of that time had imprisoned as a traitor, who died in prison, and who is venerated by Catholics as a martyr.

Twice during the canonization Mass the Pope pronounced his formula for forgiveness--was applauded twice and at length by the crowd of 120,000 who was listening to him in the rain: "Far from reopening painful wounds, which in the past have marked the body of Christ, this canonization aims at entrusting the cause of Christian unity to a glorious witness." It is certainly difficult for the Protestants to appreciate as a 'witness of unity' the figure of a Catholic priest who died as a result of the torture inflicted by Protestant authorities! It would be as if the Protestants invited the Catholics to venerate Hus, who was burned at the stake by the Catholics.

It is nevertheless likely that the Protestants appreciated the Pope's words on forgiveness. At any rate Wojtyla is aware that he has said something of historic worth: "May this day signal a new beginning in the joint effort to follow Christ, his Gospels, his law of love, his supreme longing for the unity of the faithful."

Wojtyla spoke again about the "ecumenical eloquence" of Sarkander's martyrdom during his meeting with young people in mid-afternoon. He maintained that the martyrdom "spoke to all Christians separated because of sad historical events."

At the same time he added compelling words on the reciprocity of wrongs: Sarkander's martyrdom "speaks - on the one hand--of the responsibility of Christians for the sin of division, and--on the other hand--of the subsequent disintegration of such a large part of the Church," a responsibility weighing heavily on all: "indeed we are all reciprocal trespassers against one another."

"Let us forgive and let us ask for forgiveness," concluded the Pope to the youth, using a formula that he himself had created--prior to becoming Pope--in the encounters for reconciliation between German and Polish bishops: "These words contain enormous meaning in the life of nations and societies. I used them last year with regard to the Balkan conflict, which unfortunately is still going on in the territory of the ex-Yugoslavia. I know through experience the great value of this plea in the reconciliation between the Polish and German nations."

The acknowledgement of errors and reciprocal forgiveness are not new in the ecumenical field, but they are partially new from the lips of a Pope. Pressed by advancing age and the approaching millennium, Wojtyla is hastening to free the field of past obstacles. By mid-June he will publish an ecumenical encyclical, at the end of June he will receive the Patriarch of Constantinople in Rome. The Pope with a cane may be walking more slowly. His dreams, however, have quickened.

**HUS AND SARKANDER: MARTYRS OF ENEMY FAITHS.**

Jan Hus and Jan Sarkander: The former died at the stake of heretics of the Catholic Church in 1415, the latter was tortured to death in 1620 by Bohemian nobility converted to

Protestantism. Two parallel destinies (both were betrayed despite letters of guaranty and both refused to recant their opposite beliefs) which the Pope has brought together by stating: "Let us forgive and let us ask for forgiveness."

Hus, the Protestant, was a subtle theologian as well as a critic of the corrupt customs of the ecclesiastic hierarchy. His period was marked by a Pope and an anti-Pope, and theological disputes were interwoven with politico-national issues. His persecution transformed him into a Bohemian patriot and a martyr of the faith.

Sarkander, the new Catholic saint, was the Jesuit confessor of the imperial representative in Moravia. Through torture the Protestants attempted to gain military information, perhaps obtained in the confessional. His refusal cost Sarkander his life but brought him the veneration of Catholics.