

Confession and renewal: The pope's action

From the Editors in the [March 22, 2000](#) issue

In an issue of the magazine devoted to themes of spiritual renewal, we would underscore the significance of Pope John Paul II's dramatic effort to renew and purify the Roman Catholic Church through repentance. In celebrating mass on March 12, the first Sunday of Lent, John Paul took the unprecedented step of publicly confessing the sins of the church. In his homily and in the accompanying prayers, the pope acknowledged that the church has at times betrayed the gospel by using violence in the service of truth, that it has sinned "against the dignity of women and the unity of the human race," and that it has not always stood in solidarity with the poor and oppressed.

This "apology," as it was somewhat misleadingly termed in the media, generated lots of attention and some predictable criticisms—mainly that it had not gone far enough or been specific enough. Jewish leaders pointed out that no specific mention was made of the Holocaust or of the controversial wartime role of Pius XII. The *New York Times* observed that the pope didn't mention sins against homosexuals, and it complained that the statements about discrimination against women were difficult to square with the church's stance on women's issues.

Easily overlooked in such commentary was the fact that in the March 12 service the pope was not apologizing to the church's critics or making a diplomatic overture to them. Rather, he was engaged in a liturgical act of standing before God and calling his church to the discipline of repentance. It was before God that he was confessing the church's sins, and it was God's forgiveness he was seeking. Much else remains to be done in the task of reconciliation on many fronts, including the enumeration of specific sins and the living out of repentance. Nevertheless, in this act John Paul was, in a pastoral and prophetic way, pointing toward the true source of reconciliation and renewal.

A landmark event of a different sort took place this month at the National Association of Evangelicals, which held a joint meeting with an Hispanic group and

elected its first African-American chairman of the board. Edward Foggs's election underscored the NAE's effort to avoid the charge of being "too male, too white, and too aging." A change in bylaws signaled perhaps an even more historic change: the NAE will allow denominations and church groups that belong to the National Council of Churches to join the NAE as well—if they are willing to sign the NAE's statement of faith. "Our identity is no longer based on being compared to the NCC," explained Richard Cizik of the NAE's Washington office. It's not clear which if any denominations might be inclined to hold dual membership. Since the NAE accepts as members parachurch groups and individual congregations, not just denominational bodies (as is the case with the NCC), the move may open the way for evangelical organizations within mainline churches to participate in the NAE. In any case, when the official "mainline" world and the official "evangelical" world are no longer mutually exclusive camps, it's another sign that the religious landscape is shifting and the rules are changing.