

REFLECTIONS ON THE DETMOLD CONFESSION OF RWANDA HUTU'S AND TUTSI'S

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From 7 to 12 December 1996 a meeting took place in Detmold (near Paderborn in Germany) of christians belonging to various churches in Rwanda and elsewhere, in order to pray and to think about their task in rebuilding a harmonious Rwanda. At the end of their meeting the participants issued a declaration entitled *Detmold Confession*.

We, christians of various churches, who have come from Rwanda and from elsewhere, assembled in a meeting from 7 to 12 December 1996 at Detmold in Germany at the invitation of Dr. Fulgence Rubayiza - assisted in this by the ecumenical community of Hiddesen - to pray together and to think about our efforts towards rebuilding a harmonious Rwanda which will be a good place to live in for all human beings, after discussions, exchanges of ideas and prayer, declare the following:

A few days afterwards, one of the participants sent me the text of it, asking me to give my thoughts on it. Since then I have frequently read and reread this confession. It left a deep impression on me because of its frankness: it shows profound sincerity and emotion. It also rouses all kinds of thoughts and feelings which confuse me. On the one hand I feel strong hesitation to express them, because I do not want to show disrespect for the honest intentions of the participants. On the other hand, however, I feel increasingly urged to articulate my thoughts, because I feel deeply committed to the issues raised by this confession. Moreover, I consider a number of participants as my friends and our friendship demands and bears sincerity. In this spirit I want to offer the following for consideration (in which I follow the numbering of the Detmold Confession).

1. The Rwandan people will only be able to be reconciled with itself when everybody who is part of it is prepared to kneel down before the other's suffering, to confess before the other one's own crime and humbly to ask forgiveness from one's victims.

That which is stated here as a condition for a reconciliation of the Rwandan people seems to me to be a correct starting point. One point, however, deserves to be worked out in greater detail: namely, the idea that

one wishes to confess "one's own crime" before the other. How are we to understand this in the context of this confession? It may be assumed as a matter of course that none of the signatories took part, personally, in any act of oppression or genocide. Admitting a personal crime or confessing a personal guilt is therefore out of the question. I read this, therefore, as a declaration of solidarity with the population group to which one belongs ethnically and I understand it as taking upon oneself guilt because of crimes committed by others belonging to one's population group: taking upon oneself guilt vicariously, and confessing guilt vicariously. This as such is a moving gesture which commands respect. Is it really possible, however, and has it any effect? Does this mean that those who are really guilty, those who took part effectively in oppression and genocide and who murdered, the extremists, have confessed guilt? Or does this mean that the group to which one belongs ethnically, as an organic whole, has confessed guilt? In what sense are the signatories authorized to confess guilt vicariously and to ask forgiveness?

There is another aspect to this declaration. There is a very real danger that hereby one generalizes the guilt of a (great) number of individuals for the whole population group, thereby declaring all the individuals of the group personally guilty. That is exactly what was done by the Akazu (the clique around President Habyarimana) and the Interahamwe (the Hutu militias): because the Tutsi monarchy with the Tutsi chiefs had oppressed and exploited the population of Rwanda for centuries, all Tutsi were regarded as oppressors and exploiters and treated and condemned accordingly (the radio station of the Interahamwe incited the population to kill all the Tutsi and the intended purpose of the genocide was the extermination of all Tutsi).

That is also exactly what is now being done by the RPF (the Rwandan Patriotic Front) and the regime in Kigali and, in its wake, by the international community: because Hutu extremists have committed genocide, all individual Hutu, and especially those staying outside Rwanda, are regarded as "genocidaires" and treated and condemned accordingly (RPF soldiers were therefore allowed to kill with impunity refugees in the camps in Kibeho, in Eastern Zaire and Western Tanzania, men, women and children, without the churches or the international community raising their voices in protest against it). At the same time this generalization does gross injustice to all those and everyone who during the genocide, with great personal courage and at the risk of their own lives, laboured for the cause of protecting their threatened compatriots, with the result that not a few even paid for it with their lives.

Taking the foregoing into consideration, we shall have to understand the declaration on the "confession of one's own crime" as the personal expression of fellowship and solidarity with the population group to which one belongs ethnically, however without having received a mandate for

that from one's group. Moreover, the awareness of guilt will have been strengthened by remorse, because one has remained silent at the time of the growing tensions between the population groups: although one dissociated oneself inwardly from what was perpetrated within one's own group, one did not vigorously raise one's voice against it. Out of impotence? Out of fear? Out of naivete? In this way one feels implicated in the crimes committed by others of the group. One cannot and does not want to break away from one's group: that which is done by members of the group always has an impact on the group as a whole. This group solidarity is one of the basic facts in Rwandan culture and one which we shall have to take fully into consideration: the whole group feels responsible and possibly guilty for what is done by members of the group, and revenge may in principle extend to all members of the group. In this context, therefore, the confession of guilt has a communal character. It is indeed in the light of this aspect that we shall have to understand the following confessions.

II. It is for that reason that:

II.1. We, Hutu christians present in Detmold, acknowledge that our people have oppressed the Tutsi in all kinds of ways since 1959. We confess the crime of the genocide, perpetrated by the Hutu group towards the Tutsi group during the various periods of the history of Rwanda and especially in 1994. We are ashamed of the atrocities and the brutalities which the Tutsi were made to suffer at the hands of the Hutu: tortures, rape, ripping open pregnant women, cutting human bodies to pieces, burying people alive, chasing people with dogs as one chases an animal, wholesale massacres in Roman Catholic and Protestant churches which used to be recognized places of asylum, killing off old men and women, children and sick persons in the hospitals, forcing relatives to kill their next of kin, burning people alive, refusing people to be buried and a thousand other shameless acts with a view to humiliating and killing with mockery.

We carry on our shoulders the terrible weight of this crime which is beyond speaking, and we accept to bear the consequences of it without resentment. We beg our Hutu brothers and sisters not to forget this terrible past, when they judge the present reality of Rwanda. We ask God and our Tutsi brothers and sisters humbly for forgiveness for all the wrong we have done to them. We commit ourselves to do everything in our capacity to restore to them their honour and dignity and to find again in their eyes our lost humanity.

I read this confession of the Hutu christians with deep emotion and respect. One feels in this the depth of the desperation and the shame they experience as a result of the terrible and shocking things that were done by their Hutu compatriots. They have the courage to describe all this in

concrete terms, as a self-punishment, and one feels in it their agony for what has happened which they experience as the loss of their own human dignity. It is remarkable in this that they do not restrict themselves to the three months of the general massacre among the population, the genocide, in 1994, but also include the period from 1959 until 1994. The "various periods of the history of Rwanda" refer to the years 1959 (the year of the revolution, although the social revolution itself is not criticized), 1963, 1968 and 1973 (when a lot of Tutsi fell victim to reprisals), for before 1959 Rwanda was governed by a Tutsi monarchy and there had never been a genocide among Tutsi.

At the same time they indicate by this to what extent they themselves are the victims of the extremism of the clique around former President Habyarimana and of the Interahamwe. Although they themselves are not personally guilty of the genocide, they have the terrible weight of that crime on their shoulders and accept the consequences of it without resentment. They ask their Hutu brothers and sisters not to forget this past in judging the present reality in Rwanda. Although this asking is an expression of awareness of guilt and humility, yet it also creates the danger of approving of, or at least smoothing over, the present reality, in which one should especially bear in mind the military repression which the population is suffering from. And a present wrong cannot and must not be justified by referring to an earlier wrong.

This question also contains an implicit complaint against what is happening today under the RPF administration in Rwanda. It might even be regarded as an appeal to this administration not to follow the same course as the Habyarimana administration: the genocide among the Tutsi in 1994 must not be used as a justification of murders which sometimes assume the features of a new genocide, this time against the Hutu. In a logic of revenge and counter-revenge this may be understandable, but the Gospel snatches us away from this infernal spiral. It is up to the Church and to Christians to raise one's voice against this, prophetically.

II.2. We, Tutsi Christians present in Detmold, are happy and feel relieved because of the appeal for forgiveness of our Hutu brothers.

We, in our turn, ask God and our Hutu brothers likewise forgiveness for the blind oppression and revenge exercised by our people against the Hutu populations beyond any legitimate defence.

"Inkoni ikubise mukeba uyirenza urugo" (The fact of legitimizing wrong under the pretext that it affects an opponent, ends with the fact that it turns against the one who legitimizes).

We ask God and our Hutu brothers likewise forgiveness for certain arrogant and disdainful attitudes clearly demonstrated towards them in the course of our history in the name of a ridiculous ethnic superiority complex.

Reading this confession of guilt of the Tutsi christians gives me the feeling of finding myself in different surroundings. The Tutsi christians feel happy and relieved because of the confession of guilt and the appeal for forgiveness of the Hutu brothers. This feeling of relief is undoubtedly caused by the content and the nature of the Hutu confession of guilt. It immediately strikes one, however, that on the side of the Hutu a similar relief as a result of the Tutsi confession of guilt is not expressed, with the result that here a certain imbalance becomes apparent. Now it is indeed true that in a situation of conflict one party usually confesses guilt, whereupon the other party then grants forgiveness. In the Detmold Confession, however, as appears from what is stated under point I, we have a situation of complete reciprocity: the signatories have declared here: not that there is one single party which confesses guilt and another party which grants forgiveness, but that there are two parties which are both willing to confess guilt before the other and which are both prepared to grant forgiveness. I have the impression that this reciprocity does not fully come out here. Is the confession of guilt of the Tutsi christians indeed of such a nature that the Hutu christians may feel relieved as a result of it and are able sincerely to grant forgiveness? The confession of guilt of the Hutu christians sprang up spontaneously in their hearts on the basis of the recognition of and the shame about their guilt. The Tutsi christians, "in their turn", ask forgiveness: their appeal for forgiveness does not arise from a spontaneous awareness of guilt, but from the confession of guilt of their Hutu brothers. There does not have to be anything wrong about this as such, but the question does arise whether the confession of guilt is proportional to the wrong which, according to Hutu awareness, has been done to them?

In comparison with the confession of guilt of the Hutu christians, the confession of guilt of the Tutsi christians lacks the concreteness which is so impressive in the first part. The Tutsi christians mention the "blind oppression and revenge against Hutu populations", but they do not state more precisely in which it is shown. No doubt they refer here to the period after July 1994, when the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) established its, in fact Tutsi, regime in Kigali. Since then some things may certainly be stated more precisely: disappearances of especially Hutu intellectuals, arrests without any form of trial, murders of the Hutu population, the mass murders in the refugee camp of Kibeho in April 1995, various forms of repression against Hutu in education, in government services, in the appointments of mayors, in the legal department, all of which have nothing to do with "legitimate defence". Mention should be made, with more details, of the preservation of churches with the remains of victims of the genocide as 'national monuments'. The refusal to give these victims a proper burial is not only an insult against the victims, but also stimulates the hatred against the Hutu and by itself incites to revenge.

Moreover, the period between October 1990 and April 1994 is completely left out of consideration: there is no confession of guilt about the invasion of the RPF Inkotanyi (the RPF fighters) on 1 October 1990 and the consequent massacre of the population in the Byumba prefecture during this period. It is painful that one is silent about this and the question therefore arises whether the Tutsi christians feel in any way guilty of this.

On the other hand, forgiveness is indeed asked for "certain arrogant and disdainful attitudes towards the Hutu in the course of history". It may be assumed that the Tutsi christians here allude to the history before 1959, a history of centuries. The fact that they mention this deserves appreciation and it is certainly not an easy confession of guilt. Still it would have gained depth and it would have been less noncommittal, if here, too, arrogance and contempt had been pointed out in concrete stands and actions in the past: the rejection of desires for equal rights of the Hutu population, as laid down in the Hutu Manifesto of 24 March 1957, by the mwami (the king) and the chiefs and by the 12 court dignitaries in their letter of 15 May 1958; the permanent humiliation of the Hutu population through the fact that the genitals of the conquered Hutu princes were hung on the royal drums; the forced labour to which the Hutu population had been subjected for centuries and the expropriation of their ancestral land, to mention only a few of these. It is to be regretted that the confession of guilt of the Tutsi christians is in fact restricted to rather noncommittal generalities.

II.3 We, Western christians present in Detmold, grateful for the friendship, the trust and the invitation from our Rwandan brothers and sisters to share with them their prayers, their reflections and the listening to their suffering and their hope, we confess that since the arrival of the first Europeans in Rwanda we have contributed substantially to promoting division among the Rwandan population.

We regret having - too certain of our superiority - discriminated between people and, in generalizing, having considered some of them to be good and others to be bad.

We regret the fact that, by supplying arms to all parties, our countries have supported violence.

We regret having remained silent and having abandoned the refugees in the years of independence.

We regret having remained silent and having abandoned the Rwandan people at the time of the genocide and the massacres of 1994.

We regret having remained silent and having abandoned people with respect to looking for a proper solution for the return of the refugees after the genocide.

We regret having failed to listen and to share in the affliction endured by all our Rwandan friends.

For all this wrong we sincerely ask forgiveness from God and from our Rwandan sisters and brothers whom we have not respected as such, and we want to be united with Jesus on a course of listening, respect and solidarity.

I can entirely and wholeheartedly agree with this confession of guilt. Yet I think it has too little significance and I believe it should have been specified more concretely. Although it is impracticable and unnecessary to give a complete summary, it seems to me that there are yet a number of historical actions and stands which are of crucial importance and which have decided the course of history decisively and disastrously. I shall mention a few of these which I would have liked to be included in a confession of guilt of Western christians.

I regret that the Western feeling of superiority, among other things, became manifest in a general preference for Tutsi, who were supposed to be closer to the white man than the Hutu and the Twa¹ (one might think of all kinds of so-called Hamitic theories), which more or less resulted in a real discrimination of a large section of the population, according to the theory that the Tutsi were supposed to have been born to rule and to command, and the Hutu to serve and to obey.

I regret the fact that the missionary leaders from the beginning of this century, especially Mgr. Léon Classe and the Rev. Ernst Johanssen, preferred seeking the support and the friendship of the Tutsi rulers, instead of aiming at the welfare of the oppressed population.

I regret the fact that the Western governments and the Western media thoughtlessly accepted the invasion of the RPF-Inkotanyi on 1 October 1990, as well as the fact that they refrained from giving any protection to the population. I regret the fact that the Western governments, and especially our own Dutch government, recognized and supported the illegal and military regime of the RPF in 1994 without delay, whereby they betrayed the population of Rwanda, and that no voice whatsoever was raised in protest against this by the Western churches which were active in Rwanda.

I regret the fact that we, missionaries of all kinds of churches, during a long succession of years never really took the ingrained ethnical antagonism seriously: that on the whole we remained silent about this and did not dare to raise this issue so that we did not help our Rwandan brothers and sisters to analyze this antagonism and to overcome it in the spirit of Christ.

1 The Twa or batwa ate the third ethnic group in Rwanda, about 2% of the population.

I regret the fact that, in the past, we, Protestant missionaries, dissociated ourselves from the political scene in the country and rather considered politics as a dirty business which a christian ought to keep far away from. I regret the fact that missionary preaching was chiefly aimed at individual salvation in heaven and the hereafter, instead of looking, together with the Rwandan christians, and in particular with christian politicians, for what politics should have to be in the spirit of the gospel.

About all this, too, we, Western christians, have to confess guilt and we have to ask to be forgiven by God and by our Rwandan brothers and sisters.

III. We urge all those who are part of Rwandan society, and their friends of the international community, to feel equally committed to the misery of the two population groups. We call upon them to cooperate towards relieving the burden and restoring the dignity of all those who have been made to suffer through the Rwandan tragedy: the widows, the orphans, the prisoners, the former and the present refugees, the homeless, and those who have been made to suffer brutally, namely the Batwa. May everybody in Rwanda find recognition and appreciation, the room to settle amidst brothers, sisters and friends.

This exhortation is a natural consequence of the preceding confession and we wholeheartedly agree with it. Of course, it should not get bogged down in general terms: it calls for a concrete commitment. The exhortation for all "to feel equally committed to the misery of the two population groups" and the encouragement "to cooperate towards relieving the burden and restoring the dignity of all those who have been made to suffer through the Rwandan tragedy" far exceeds an invitation to charitable action. It cannot be anything but a call for political commitment. The intended goal can never be achieved with charitable activities under a government which itself wants to cling to power at any price, thereby excluding the greater part of the population, a government which in fact is only supported by just one ethnical component of the population, maintaining its rule by military force. The exhortation towards political commitment is therefore at the same time a call for political changes in which the population as a whole is done justice to. It is also a call upon churches and christians not to be silent this time and become guilty once again, but to speak and act in a priestly and prophetic manner and to dedicate themselves to a liberated and just society, for the welfare and blessing of all, irrespective of their ethnic origin.

In this connection, it is significant as well as alarming to observe that among those taking part in the meeting in Detmold there was a representative of the RPF who refused to sign the Confession, a refusal which was also endorsed by a few Tutsi participants.

IV. We give thanks to the Father who has given us his Spirit to break our hearts of stone and to liberate us from the distrust and the fear which kept us separated from each other. He has made us brothers and sisters again, committed together to the Path of his Son who died and rose to reconcile people with God and with each other.

Notwithstanding the criticism, which can be uttered on many parts of the Confession, we have to be thankful with the participants, that this encounter took place. Thankful, because the ban, which prevented an honest and open discussion of ethnic differences and discrepancies, has been lifted. The present government in Kigali even has declared this ban its official doctrine: nobody should use the terminologies of Hutu, Tutsi and Twa. This in fact endorses a strengthening of the Tutsi element in all levels of society and discrimination of the Hutu and Twa. But it is also very threatening: the tension is not overcome, but pushed aside. It may creep and grow as a cancer and erupt at a later moment.

Therefore we should trust that the meeting in Detmold with its Confession brings a real breakthrough and creates a climate, which facilitates the open and honest discussion of discrepancies and mutual feelings. We certainly also may expect some strong disagreement against this position. Nevertheless we have to anticipate, that the road to reconciliation is open as the road to a new society. It is encouraging that these first steps were taken under the incentive of the Gospel by Christians who live by Reconciliation.

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