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Mea Culpa: through my fault....

"When I was 16 years old, we got a new religion teacher. He was a man who held rather peculiar beliefs, leaning towards communism. At the beginning of the new school year we would go into the classroom and there would be posters of African leaders. (He mentioned a name, but I didn't remember it). The chalk board said, "We are all guilty." I disagreed. In my opinion, he misinterpreted original sin.

It is not that we all constantly do evil, but that as human beings we tend to do things that should we shouldn't do. We do not carry an enormous blame on our shoulders. I have always resisted that, I have always tried to do the right thing, but not from the fear of blame or shame. Rather from the thoughts of Augustine who says: 'Ama et fac quod vis', 'love and do what you will'. There can be found other versions of it: 'dilige et fac quod vis': treat the people with fair play, respect them and do as you please.

Today, I would like to explore the concept of guilt and the related idea of morality (what is good? When are you a good person? When do you do nothing wrong?) in cultural and historical context for a moment.

Catholics and Protestants both know the concept of guilt. Both talk about 'sin' and 'confession'. But there are also differences: with the Catholics it is simple: if you have done something wrong and you go to confession, then it's OK again. Among Protestants, a sin lingers longer. Moreover, Catholics usually also enjoyed their sins, the Protestants suffered from them.

I advocate sincere repentance: if you apologise to the one you harmed, why should you still have to be tortured and flogged? Repentance should be able to work like a confession.

Those were the old times. Then came a period when many people jettisoned the concept of sin, along with their faith. Living without the idea of 'sin' was tantamount to freedom. In the 60s and 70s, quite a lot was possible; you had to try very hard to still be sinful. Everything was possible and allowed.

Today, we see a return to a much stricter morality. We tolerate much less from others again. The attacks of 9/11 are have something to do with that, Europe's declining strength in the world too (our 'old' self-evident grandeur is waning), but above all the fear is causing people to become stricter towards their fellow man.

The church is no longer the body that guards good and evil; we do that ourselves now. I call that 'secular moralism', it is no longer religious. We judge each other (e.g. social media). Science, too, has in a way taken over that role. We blindly believe everything 'science' tells us. When sociologists conduct a study to show that blond people are more prone to kleptomania, we are going to believe that.

Let me give you some examples of that secular moralism:

1. 'delayed suffering': what was done to someone in the past must be compensated for today. The suffering of centuries ago, the pain of a previous generation, has to be compensated to the generation of today. The injustice of long ago, plays a role today in what we want to see as retribution. For example, women. You may know a few, you may be one yourself or you are planning to become one. Well, the fact that women were not allowed to hold public office for centuries, barely had any rights, were oppressed etc... must be compensated by the generation of women today.

Another example: Limburg (a Flemish province). There, the Italian transmigrant called Julius Caesar defeated Ambiorix and still that section of the population suffer as a result. If the Eburones hadn't been defeated, today would be a better life for the Limburgers.

This is of course an absurd example, but it does show that we have to ask ourselves the question of when delayed suffering ends. (I immediately thought of the Flemish and NV-A: who write entire historical books full on about their oppression and how we should be compensated for it today)

2. Morality running backwards in time: looking at past mistakes with today's eyes and judging with today's morality. What did we do wrong on 14 June 1971? Why should we start judging that with today's thinking patterns? How can we judge who was wrong or right in the war, with our frame of reference today?

3. The New Virtue: how should we live?

- Above all, be sincere and show your feelings always and everywhere. Men are supposedly not so good at that. I heard in a debate this question being asked to a bishop. He was said to have shown too little emotion at a terrible story. His answer: "I have found a solution to that to that, I always carry an onion in my pocket, so I can cry whenever it is required."

- living: not in a lavish villa in the Zoute, but in a flat in the city. Preferably with radishes on your roof, so that CO2 emissions are limited and the polar bears can stay alive.

- Co-housing with annoying teenagers: you share a garden, a music room, a bathroom... Don't do that with people you like, because in no time you won't like them anymore. So it's more convenient with people you dislike from the start.

- Divide household chores 50-50 between husband and wife. Make sure you can't be blamed for anything in contributing to a well running household.

- zero tolerance, an eye for an eye (often both your eyes), revenge: demanding as much compensation as what has been broken. We tolerate nothing any more.

Today, I advocate loose morals. I advocate that all of you would loosen up. That shouldn't happen right now, but still. I like to tell the story of Zacchaeus from the Gospel of Luke. Zacchaeus was a tax collector, a man of small stature. Usually that shows great intelligence, but Zacchaeus was someone who had cheated quite a few people with his financial practices. When Jesus came to his city, he climbed a tree to

see Jesus properly. Jesus saw him sitting in the tree and asked who he was. After his story, Jesus said: "I will come and eat with you and your family later." Afterwards, Zacchaeus had convinced Jesus of his misdeeds and Zacchaeus decided to donate half his fortune to the poor. Jesus was satisfied.

So Jesus goes to eat with a corrupt man, who is not perfect and who does not distribute all the corruptly obtained profits, but barely half! That is enough for Jesus, enough as compensation for what Zacchaeus had done. You don't always have to sacrifice everything to make up for your bad deeds.

Another fact is forgiveness. I used to have a colleague and every time something was done to him he said: 'I'll stick that up my sleeve'. In the long run the man ended up in hospital with far too heavy sleeves.

Let's live less cramped, detect fewer mistakes, forgive each other more often. Let the other person make his mistakes. Forgiveness is not only a feeling that benefits the other, but also yourself. You lose a mental burden with it.

Worship your enemies. This is not easy, but for me it is the only way. Suppose two men think they are each other's friends. They like to have a glass together and talk easily. Suppose they both work in the same criminal organisation called a bank. And that there is only one promotion for which they are both qualified. So how can you let that friendship exist, work towards having that job without becoming each other's enemies? Only by loving the other, no matter what.

My plea is that if we take ourselves as the standard to determine what another person does right or wrong, we are not going to get there. That is why I believe in religion. Because it creates a framework. I believe in religion to be able to distance yourself, to not see yourself as beginning and end."

(version from own notes, not authorised by the speaker)