

## An Open Letter to Pope John Paul II

Your Holiness,

It is with great joy that we applaud the amends made by the Catholic Church to the ill-fated Jewish people, so long persecuted for the false accusation of deicide.

But Papal authority is equally as well as principally responsible for the accusation, torture and burning for two centuries (1450-1650) of tens of thousands of victims of another group of human beings who had no hope of recourse. We speak of the *sexocide* of the witches: a fact afflicting a much larger part of humanity, about half, the women, who before this massacre and for a long time after were made to suffer the hostility, contempt and repulsion which served as fodder for this attempt at extermination.

Sexocide is the right word because it was a matter of misogyny striking an entire sex under pretext of witchcraft and held responsible for Original Sin, as were the Jews for the death of Christ: a misogyny brought to a head by the writings of the Fathers of the Church as well as by brilliant theologians like Tertullien and Origene. For a long time, amidst the influence of Thomas Aquinas, Jean Chrysostome and Saint Jerome among so many others, the insults and curses of this tradition served to lay the way for this “witch-hunt” which was, above all, a “woman-hunt” more than a hunt for witchcraft itself, because just as the *Malleus*<sup>1</sup> of Kramer and Sprenger states, “*Sorcerers* (male witches) *are of little consequence.*”

We remind Your Holiness that these two authors were not the fathers, yet the birthers of this bane – the plague of misogyny – the most famous being the Dominican Jakob Sprenger (1436-1496) now recognized by historians as a sexual obsessive on the brink of psychopathology despite his chaste morality. On the contrary it was the completely corrupt Pope Innocent VIII, whose orgies maintained the anxiety of Sin and the fear of the daughters of Eve, who gave print to this wide call to murder and upheld it. He approved of Sprenger’s choice to elect the term *Maleficarum* rather than *Maleficorum* to underline that it was especially a question of pursuing and killing the Evil in women, hardly in male witches. These are well-known historical truths.

The story is even more remarkable when one considers that despite the passage of time, a very convincing case of heresy in regards to this famous manual, prelude to *Mein Kampf*, has never been exposed.

One of the most established tenants of the Church is the washing away of sins by the body of Christ, washing away accomplished by Baptismal water *for any human being*, irregardless of station or race. Yet Kramer and Sprenger attribute an inborn sin to a specific group of humans which places them outside of the realm of the human, despite Baptism. “Let us give thanks to God to have spared our sex from such an evil,” says the *Malleus*. Why has the heretical impertinence of this declaration never been denounced? Were women required to undergo a second baptism, one of fire?

However iniquitous the persecution of the Jew, an escape route was offered to him: he could become baptized by holy water. He was strongly encouraged to do so; the poorest of Spanish Jews could choose the king as godfather, if he converted. But the woman, unable to change herself into a man, was condemned in advance. Even nuns were always suspect of sorcery. The self-satisfaction that the two authors of the *Malleus* give to their own sex contradicts their first opinion that “sorcerers are of little consequence.” In the end, they’re nothing. And Evil lives only within the already disparaged, insulted and cursed sex: the second.

This is how it was possible for the Bishop of Trèves to burn little seven-year-old girls because they were, at that age, beginning to mature into women; the Germanic banks of the Rhine were at one point so depopulated of one half of their inhabitants that men were complaining of having to travel far to find a wife. It is because of these monstrous assertions that women constituted four-fifths of those murdered by fire, for two centuries, across the West. Here are the official numbers:

### **16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries<sup>2</sup>:**

- Bâle: 95%
- Aragon: 57%
- Namur: 92%
- Prévôtés “Luxembourg Germans”: 69%
- Pays de Vaud: 66%
- Montbéliard: 82%
- Franche-Comté: 67%
- Germany: 80%
- Austria, in Voralberg: 100%, where *only women* were persecuted.

The fact that the Reformed regions were just as ardent or sometimes even more than the Catholic countries to apply sexocide does not exonerate the Church and its Inquisition in any way. What’s more, it was a Protestant tribunal, that of Salem, in America, which was the only one to recognize its error and to admit its guilt.

The assimilation of women by Jews is also an element rarely examined in the study of this question; it is however so flagrant as to constitute one more argument in the necessity of an exoneration of these victims by the Church. The *sabbath*, name chosen for the witches holy day, is the Jewish day of rest. What’s more, it was said that witches went to *synagogue*. Already in the 14<sup>th</sup> century the theologian Alvaro Pelayo proclaimed: “The woman is similar to the Jew.” This analogy is not only a part of the vices and misdeeds which we reproach, but also of an appalling contradiction; the Christian, for whom the trafficking of money was forbidden, had a fundamental need of the Jew for whom the Catholic world reserved this specialty; and in order to reproduce human life, the same Christian world needs the woman; this is the appalling “compromise.” The historian Jean Delumeau has highlighted this: “Anti-

Semitism and the witch-hunts coincided.” (*La grande peur de l’Occident*, Paris: Fayard 1978.)

But there is another area of damnation upon which the Feminine touches, that Feminine doomed to evil spell by her sinful yet reproductive anatomy: that of homosexuality. The “silent sin,” the most horrible of fornications since the first Christian Emperor Constantine’s legislation finds its abomination in the fact that a man might imitate a woman, even though “he has the good-fortune not to be one.” In the presence of witchcraft, “buggery” was always suspected.

But the witch brought forward a new aspect to this old problem: “They loved each other amongst themselves, thus excluding men...” As Jean Duby revealed, the affection that women felt for one another disturbed the men of the Middle Ages, who at the same time saw nothing wrong with the indestructible affection that knights felt for one another.<sup>3</sup> In fact, for these simpletons, such a relationship in no way resembled “effeminacy” and thus nothing sexual was suspected. But the sisterly solidarity of the witches could only reveal the abomination condemned by Leviticus and by Constantine.

This element of the allergy to the Feminine has not often been analyzed in the abundant records of the witch-hunts. It remains, however, an integral component of it.

For over two centuries filled with the horrors and tortures inflicted by an assimilationist culture, the witch thus represented the climax of the allergy to the Feminine already so largely demonstrated at the highest levels since the beginnings of the triumphant Church, and exemplified by the persecution of the Jews and the condemnation of homosexuality.

The indignation that women of today feel, especially if they are members of this Church or this religion, is even more vehement since the Gospel, “on which Peter built his Church,” is, of all the holy books in the world, *the only one which is feminist*. Not only is this exemplified in the person of the Virgin, not only by the passages consecrated to the Samaritan, to the adulterous woman, and to Mary Magdalene, but also by a very significant comparison between Temptation itself and the other scenarios of the diverse prophets or holy persons whom the Devil comes upon; the confrontation of Jesus in the desert with Satan brings with it temptations of power and of greed, and not once that of the flesh of woman, the temptation which is primordial in other accounts of this kind. Not one word of the Gospel ever condemned the feminine, and the role of women therein supplants that of the apostles through fidelity in love and the precedence of the apparition in the Resurrection.

The plague of misogyny and the massacre of the witches belong then to a perversion of religious doctrine which the women of the 20<sup>th</sup> century now have the right to see condemned by the supreme leader of this Church which slandered, humiliated and killed such a large number of our grandmothers.

This is why we await that amends be made by Your Holiness in the same vein as that which dictated the deploration of the medieval genocide of the Jews,

now cleansed of the accusation of deicide, while the “witches” were never accused of anything so insane. And we assure Your Holiness of our confidence in Your sense of Justice of which you have already shown such an equitable and perfect example.

**Françoise d’Eaubonne**, writer

**Andrée Michel**, Honorary Director of Research for the National Council of Scientific Research, France.

Translated from the French by Jacob Paisain, University of Montana, USA (1998)

---

<sup>1</sup> *Translators note:* The *Malleus Maleficarum* is essentially a witch-hunter’s guide published after Pope Innocent VIII’s Bull of 1484 which laid ground for the witch-hunting craze.

<sup>2</sup> The numbers presented here as well as most of the facts cited are drawn from *La Sorcière et l’Occident*, by the esteemed Germanist Guy Bechtel, (Paris: Plon, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> *Eve et les prêtres*, Georges Duby, Paris: Gallimard, 1996. Cited by Guy Bechtel, *op. Cit.*.