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