



JESUS CHRIST

His trial and death

Texts from the

Catechism of the Catholic Church

THE TRIAL OF JESUS

Divisions among the Jewish authorities concerning Jesus

Among the religious authorities of Jerusalem, not only were the Pharisee Nicodemus and the prominent Joseph of Arimathea both secret disciples of Jesus, but there was also long-standing dissension about him, so much so that St. John says of these authorities on the very eve of Christ's Passion, "many... believed in him," though very imperfectly. (Jn 12:42)

This is not surprising, if one recalls that on the day after Pentecost "a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith" and "some believers... belonged to the party of the Pharisees," to the point that St. James could tell St. Paul, "How many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed; and they are all zealous for the Law." (Acts 6:7; 15:5; 21:20) (595)

The religious authorities in Jerusalem were not unanimous about what stance to take toward Jesus. The Pharisees threatened to excommunicate his followers. To those who feared that "everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation," the high priest Caiaphas replied by prophesying: "It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish." (Jn 11:48-50)

The Sanhedrin, having declared Jesus deserving of death as a blasphemer but having lost the right to put anyone to death, hands him over to the Romans, accusing him of political revolt, a charge that puts him in the same category as Barabbas who had been accused of sedition. The high priests also threatened Pilate politically so that he would condemn Jesus to death. (596)

The Jews are not collectively responsible for Jesus' death

The historical complexity of Jesus' trial is apparent in the Gospel accounts. The personal sin of the participants (Judas, the Sanhedrin, Pilate) is known to God alone. Hence we cannot lay responsibility for the trial on the Jews in Jerusalem as a whole, despite the outcry of a manipulated crowd and the global reproaches contained in the apostles' calls to conversion after Pentecost. Jesus himself, in forgiving them on the cross, and Peter in following suit, both accept "the ignorance" of the Jews of Jerusalem and even of their leaders.

Still less can we extend responsibility to other Jews of different times and places, based merely on the crowd's cry: "His blood be on us and on our children!" a formula for ratifying a judicial sentence. (Mt 27:25) As the Church declared at the Second Vatican Council:

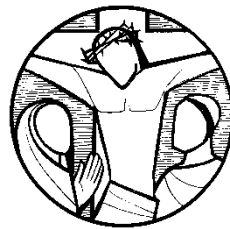
"... neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his Passion... the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy Scripture." (597)

All sinners were the authors of Christ's Passion

In her Magisterial teaching of the faith and in the witness of her saints, the Church has never forgotten that "sinners were the authors and the ministers of all the sufferings that the divine Redeemer endured." (Roman Catechism) Taking into account the fact that our sins affect Christ himself, the Church does not hesitate to impute to Christians the gravest responsibility for the torments inflicted upon Jesus, a responsibility with which they have all too often burdened the Jews alone:

"We must regard as guilty all those who continue to relapse into their sins. Since our sins made the Lord Christ suffer the torment of the cross, those who plunge themselves into disorders and crimes crucify the Son of God anew in their hearts (for he is in them) and hold him up to contempt. And it can be seen that our crime in this case is greater in us than in the Jews. As for them, according to the witness of the Apostle, "None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." We, however, profess to know him. And when we deny him by our deeds, we in some way seem to lay violent hands on him." (Roman Catechism of the Council of Trent)

"Nor did demons crucify him; it is you who have crucified him and crucify him still, when you delight in your vices and sins." (St Francis of Assisi) (598)



CHRIST'S REDEMPTIVE DEATH IN GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION

"Jesus handed over according to the definite plan of God"

Jesus' violent death was not the result of chance in an unfortunate coincidence of circumstances, but is part of the mystery of God's plan, as St. Peter explains to the Jews of Jerusalem in his first sermon on Pentecost: "This Jesus [was] delivered up

according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God." (Acts 2:23) This Biblical language does not mean that those who handed him over were merely passive players in a scenario written in advance by God. (599)

To God, all moments of time are present in their immediacy. When therefore he establishes his eternal plan of "predestination," he includes in it each person's free response to his grace: "In this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place." (Acts 4:27-28) For the sake of accomplishing his plan of salvation, God permitted the acts that flowed from their blindness. (600)

"The suffering Servant" died in accordance with the Scriptures

The Scriptures had foretold this divine plan of salvation through the putting to death of "the righteous one, my Servant" as a mystery of universal redemption, that is, as the ransom that would free men from the slavery of sin. Citing a confession of faith that he himself had "received," St. Paul professes that "Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the Scriptures*." (1 Cor 15:3) In particular Jesus' redemptive death fulfils Isaiah's prophecy of the suffering Servant. Indeed Jesus himself explained the meaning of his life and death in the light of God's suffering Servant. After his Resurrection he gave this interpretation of the Scriptures to the disciples at Emmaus, and then to the apostles. (601)

"For our sake God made him to be sin"

Consequently, St. Peter can formulate the apostolic faith in the divine plan of salvation in this way: "You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers... with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of the times for your sake." (1 Pet 18-20) Man's sins, following on original sin, are punishable by death. By sending his own Son in the form of a slave, in the form of a fallen humanity, on account of sin, God "made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor 5: 21) (602)

"We are reconciled to God by the death of his Son"

Jesus did not experience reprobation as if he himself had sinned. But in the redeeming love that always united him to the Father, he assumed us in the state of our waywardness of sin, to the point that he could say in our name from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 15: 34) Having thus established him in solidarity with us sinners, God "did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all," so that we might be "reconciled to God by the death of his Son." (Rom 8:32; 5:10) (603)

God takes the initiative of universal redeeming love

By giving up his own Son for our sins, God manifests that his plan for us is one of benevolent love, prior to any merit on our part: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins." (1 Jn 4:10; 4:19) God "shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." (Rom 5:8) (604)

At the end of the parable of the lost sheep Jesus recalled that God's love excludes no one: "So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." (Mt 18:14) He affirms that he came "to give his life as a ransom *for many*"; this last term is not restrictive, but contrasts the whole of humanity with the unique person of the redeemer who hands himself over to save us. (Mt 20:28)

The Church, following the apostles, teaches that Christ died for all men without exception: "There is not, never has been, and never will be a single human being for whom Christ did not suffer." (Council of Quiercy, 853) (605)

IN BRIEF

- **"Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3). (619)**
- **Our salvation flows from God's initiative of love for us, because "he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (1 Jn 4:10). "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19). (620)**
- **Jesus, the Son of God, freely suffered death for us in complete and free submission to the will of God, his Father. By his death he has conquered death, and so opened the possibility of salvation to all men. (1019)**

