

LIFT HIGH THE CROSS

In suffering and death his humanity became the free and perfect instrument of his divine love which desires the salvation of men.

—CCC, no. 609

In a number of ways, Jesus warned his followers that pain and death would be an essential part of his mission. Right after he made Peter the rock on which the Church would be built, he predicted his Passion. “Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Mt 16:21). When Peter protested this possibility, Jesus rebuked him, “You are thinking, not as God does, but as human beings do” (Mt 16:23). Jesus predicted his Passion again after the Transfiguration (cf. Mt 17:22-23).

Not only would Jesus accept the Cross, he expected the same willingness from his disciples. “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23). Jesus explained this truth further by means of an agricultural image. “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat, but if it dies it produces much fruit” (Jn 12:24). Jesus noted that the greatest expression of love is to die for the beloved. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13).

Because Christ’s suffering and death was the instrument of salvation, from what did he save us? We needed to be saved from sin and its damaging effects. God’s plan to save us involved having the Son of God enter into this world to be like us in all things except sin. Divine love made this possible.

Jesus, Son of God, was sent by the Father to restore the harmony between himself and humanity that had been disrupted by sin. He came to teach and show us love. Jesus was without sin, but in his human nature, he was subject to all that human beings suffer, including hatred from others, torture, and death itself. He proclaimed the coming of God’s

Kingdom by his words and deeds in obedience to the will of his Father. He showed the full meaning of all that had been revealed in the Old Testament. But some did not want to hear his message. They opposed him and turned him over to the administration of the Roman Empire in Palestine to be put to death.

On the Cross, Jesus freely gave his life as a sacrifice. His sacrifice was an act of atonement, that is, it makes us one again with God by the power of divine mercy extending to us the Father's forgiveness of our sins. His sacrifice is also called an *act of satisfaction* or *reparation*⁷ because he lives out fully the Father's call to human beings to be faithful to his plan for them, thus overcoming the power of sin. It is also an *expiation*⁸ for our sins, which in the understanding of Scripture means that God takes the initiative in bringing about reconciliation to himself. In the words of Christian Tradition, Jesus' sacrifice merits salvation for us because it retains forever the power to draw us to him and to the Father.

Who is responsible for the death of Jesus? Every one of us from the dawn of history to the end of time who in pride and disobedience has sinned is in some way responsible. Historically, some Jewish leaders handed Jesus over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who condemned Jesus to death on the Cross.

It is wrong to blame the Jewish people for the death of Christ in the manner that often has been done in history. "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" (CCC, no. 598). At the Second Vatican Council, the Church made the following declaration regarding the Jewish people:

7 *Reparation* means "making amends for a wrong done or for an offense, especially for sin, which is an offense against God. By his death on the cross, the Son of God offered his life out of love for the Father to make reparation for our sinful disobedience" (CCC, Glossary).

8 *Expiation* is "the act of redemption and atonement for sin which Christ won for us by the pouring out of his blood on the cross, by his obedient love 'even to the end' (*Jn* 13:1)" (CCC, Glossary).

Neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his Passion. . . . [T]he Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy Scripture. (CCC, no. 597; citing Second Vatican Council, *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* [*Nostra Aetate*; NA], no. 4)

The Apostles' Creed professes that after his death and burial, Jesus descended into hell. In the language of the early Church, this meant that Jesus went into the realm of the dead, from which he called out all the just people who had lived before him to enter with him into the glory of the Kingdom of Heaven. A popular icon of the Eastern Churches pictures the risen Jesus with his hands reaching into the realm of the dead to draw out Adam and Eve.

In his human soul united to his divine person, the dead Christ went down into the realm of the dead. He opened Heaven's gates for the just who had gone before him. (CCC, no. 637)

CHRIST IS RISEN! ALLELUIA!

Christ's Resurrection is an object of faith in that it is a transcendent intervention of God himself in creation and history.

—CCC, no. 648

When we speak of the Paschal Mystery, we refer to Christ's death and Resurrection as one inseparable event. It is a mystery because it is a visible sign of an invisible act of God. It is paschal because it is Christ's passing through death into new life. For us it means that we can now die to sin and its domination of our lives, and we pass over into divine life already here on earth and more completely in heaven. Death is conquered in the sense that not only do our souls survive physical death, but even our bodies will rise again at the end of time at the Last Judgment and resurrection of the dead.