

## Maronite Monks of Adoration

# THE PASSION OF CHRIST AND OUR RESPONSE



Gethsemane — Carl Bloch

The first group of people that you find at the crucifixion of Our Lord are the chief priests and the scribes and those who are said to be simply “passing by”. These are the ones who mocked Our Lord, who ridiculed Him and said to Him: “You who would destroy the Temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God come down from the Cross.” And “He is the King of Israel; let Him come down now from the Cross, and we will believe in Him.” These are the ones who refuse to accept a crucified Messiah, who rebel at the very notion of the possibility of a crucified Messiah and who demand from Him that if He is in fact the Christ, He should do something to prove it; they put Him to the test and insist that He make it evident beyond any shadow of doubt that He is the one God has sent to fulfill all the prophecies and restore the fortunes of Israel.

It’s not difficult to see this attitude of the chief priests and scribes present in much of the modern secular world. And because we are children of our age, we can perhaps even recognize at least the temptation to this same attitude in ourselves. Pope Benedict XVI has some very insightful things to say about this attitude that is so prevalent in the modern world. In one place our Holy Father writes: “Christ is challenged to establish His credibility by offering evidence for His claims. This demand for proof is a constantly recurring theme in the story of Jesus’ life; again and again He is reproached for having failed to prove Himself sufficiently, for having hitherto failed to work that great miracle that will remove all ambiguity and every contradiction, so as to make it indisputably clear for everyone who and what He is or is not.

“And we make this same demand of God and Christ and His Church throughout the whole of history. ‘If you exist, God,’ we say, ‘then you’ll just have to show yourself. You’ll have to part the clouds that conceal you and give us the clarity that we deserve. If you, Christ, are really the Son of God, and not just another one of

When you look at the four Gospels, it is apparent that they all give a prominent place to the narration of Our Lord’s passion and death—Christ’s passion and death are presented very clearly as the climax of Our Lord’s earthly mission. And the accounts that the Evangelists have left us are rich in all kinds of significant and precious details. And, I think, that in many ways the story of Christ’s suffering and death on the Cross, with all its details, gives us a kind of paradigm or pattern for all times and for all ages.

In this newsletter I would like to reflect on just one aspect of the story of Our Lord’s crucifixion. I would like to consider the different ways in which the various eye-witnesses of the crucifixion reacted and responded to what they were seeing and experiencing. We find a whole spectrum of different ways in which the people who were present responded to the sight of Our Lord’s suffering and humiliation on the Cross—and it’s a spectrum of reactions that we continue to see all down the ages as people continue to confront Christ’s passion—not only the passion He suffered 2000 years ago, but the one that He continues to suffer, in some mysterious way, even now in His Mystical Body, in the Church and in the individual lives of the members of His Church.

the enlightened individuals who keep appearing in the course of history, then you'll just have to prove it more clearly than you are doing now. And if the Church is really supposed to be yours, you'll have to make that much more obvious than it is at present."

And then, later on, in commenting on this same attitude Our Holy Father writes: "The arrogance that would make God an object and impose our laboratory conditions upon Him is incapable of finding Him. For it already implies that we deny God as God by placing ourselves above Him, by discarding the whole dimension of love, of interior listening; by no longer acknowledging as real anything but what we can experimentally test and grasp. To think like that is to make oneself God. And to do that is to abase not only God, but the world and oneself, too."

The second category of people involved in Our Lord's passion that we can reflect on are those who are represented by our Lord's apostles. They are the ones who believe that Our Lord was, in fact, sent from God; they believe that He is the Messiah; He is the one promised and foretold by the prophets and who will redeem Israel. But at the sight of the depths of Christ's suffering and humiliation they are filled with incomprehension. How can this be? How is this possible? It is the kind of reaction that I think almost all Christians experience, at one time or another, when they are faced with the mystery of suffering.

In one of his books Fr. Walter Ciszek, an American Jesuit, tells about his experience in Poland during World War II. He was living in a town called Albertyn in eastern Poland at the time that the Russians invaded. And after the invasion the communist authorities took charge of the town and began, as was their custom, to persecute those who actively practiced their faith. And Fr. Ciszek writes of his own experience as he witnessed this persecution: "The perplexity and pain grew with me as I saw the visible Church, once strong and organized, dissolve under the attacks of these invaders and watched the people grow estranged, pressured ceaselessly into accepting this new order...How frustrating it was to hear the Church and priests and religious openly slandered in communist propaganda, and to know that the children had to learn and repeat atheist doctrines every day in school and in their class work. How could God allow this? And why?"

"I did not blame the people. I knew they had not lost their faith but were just afraid right now to practice it openly. They came to me at night to ask how they should conduct themselves, to ask whether it was wrong to cooperate with the new order, to ask if they should let their children join the [communist] organizations, or whether they themselves should join the labor unions. And finally, they came to ask whether, under the circumstances, it was wrong not to come to church on Sundays or feast days. And what could I tell them? How much heroism could I ask of them? How much did God, who had allowed all this to happen, expect of these simple, ordinary people of the backwoods of Albertyn?"

"It was agony for me as a priest to ask these questions, but it was impossible not to ask them. They crowded to mind in time of prayer, they came at Mass, they came all through the days and nights. And I'm sure they came not to me alone. It was not a crisis of faith, any more than it is for anyone who has ever suffered a great loss or faced a family tragedy and asked himself the same questions. It was rather a crisis of understanding, and no one need be ashamed to admit he has been troubled by it." (from *He Leadeth Me*, p. 19-20)

In this situation, once again Christ was on the Cross in His Church and the faithful struggled with the same incomprehension that beset the apostles and disciples of Christ 2000 years ago. It takes a very deep faith to believe and accept that this kind of suffering falls within God's providence and has redemptive value.

It is something of this deeper faith and vision that we find in the third way of responding to the suffering and death of Our Lord on the Cross that we see on Calvary, the response that we find in the two great professions of faith: the profession of faith of the Good Thief and the profession of the Roman centurion who after Christ had died said: "Truly this was the Son of God." Of all the acts of faith that we find in the New Testament, I find the act of faith of the Good Thief the most astonishing. It is one thing to witness Our Lord's miracles, to see Him make the lame walk and the blind see and to watch Him raise the dead and then profess one's faith in Him; it is one thing to profess one's faith in Our Lord after one has witnessed His resurrection. But to look at a man who is dying on a cross and say: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom", that is simply astonishing. To the minds of

almost all of Christ's contemporaries, a Messiah who is captured and killed by His enemies is by definition a failed Messiah. But here we have this thief, this brigand, who has been given the grace to profess his faith in a crucified Messiah.

But even beyond this profession of faith and even surpassing this amazing grace of the Good Thief, we find one person at the foot of the Cross who gives the fullest and the deepest and the most perfect response possible; this, of course, is the response of the Mother of Jesus. Her heart was completely united with that of her Son. No one suffered more keenly than her, and no one accepted their suffering more willingly than her. She is clearly our model in how we ought to respond to the passion of Our Lord: His passion then and His continuing passion in the Church now. I think we should meditate often on the sentiments of Our Lady's heart as she stood beneath the Cross. Do you think that her heart was full of bitterness and hostility toward the people who were responsible for Our Lord's suffering, towards the Jewish leaders and the Roman authorities? Was she raging inside on account of the terrible injustice that her Son was suffering? Do you think that she was full of resentment and anger at the defection of the Apostles at the time of her Son's

greatest need? I don't think so. I think the fundamental attitude of Our Lady at the foot of the Cross was one of acceptance, of abandonment to the mysterious and loving plan of God. She was in complete conformity with the soul of her Son and with the will of God: if He willingly accepted the Cross then so would she. And so Our Lady remains our model for how we should respond to the injustices we suffer, how we should respond to those who have hurt us, and how we should respond to the continuing passion of Christ in His Church: to the sometimes terrible infidelities and scandals that we hear of on the inside of the Church and to the unjust attacks on the Church by those who are outside. It does not mean that we can not and should not strive for justice, but that we should also strive to accept all that befalls us as coming from the hands of God. This is what we are called to in striving to follow the will of God. And, as Pope Benedict XVI writes in one place, "If you follow the will of God, you know that in spite of all the terrible things that happen to you, you will never lose a final refuge. You know that the foundation of the world is love, so that even when no human being can or will help you, you may go on, trusting in the One who loves you." ✠