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Father Cantalamessa on the Passion of Christ

"We Are All Responsible for Jesus' Death"

ROME, MARCH 30, 2007 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of a commentary by the Pontifical Household preacher, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, on the readings for this Sunday's liturgy.

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A Historical Look at the Passion of Christ

Palm Sunday

Isaiah 50:4-7; Philippians 2:6-11; Luke 22:14-23, 56

On Palm Sunday we will hear in its entirety St. Luke's account of the Passion. Let us pose the crucial question, that question which the Gospels were written to answer: How is it that a man like this ended up on the cross? What were the motives of those responsible for Jesus' death?

According to a theory that began to circulate last century, after the tragedy of the Shoah, the responsibility for Christ's death falls principally -- indeed perhaps even exclusively -- on Pilate and the Roman authorities, whose motivation was of a more political than religious nature. The Gospels supposedly vindicated Pilate and accused the Jewish leaders of Christ's death in order to reassure the Roman authorities about the Christians and to court their friendship.

This thesis was born from a concern which today we all share: to eradicate every pretext for the anti-Semitism that has caused much suffering for the Jewish people at the hands of Christians. But the gravest mistake that can be made for a just cause is to defend it with erroneous arguments. The fight against anti-Semitism should be put on a more solid foundation than a debatable (and debated) interpretation of the Gospel accounts of the Passion.

That the Jewish people as such are innocent of Christ's death rests on a biblical certainty that Christians have in common with Jews but that for centuries was strangely forgotten. "The son shall not be charged with the guilt of his father, nor shall the father be charged with the guilt of his son" (Ezekiel 18:20). Church teaching knows only one sin that is transmitted from father to son, original sin, no other.

Having made it clear that I reject anti-Semitism, I would like to explain why it is not possible to accept the complete innocence of the Jewish authorities in Christ's death and along with it the claim about the purely political nature of Christ's condemnation.

Paul, in the earliest of his letters, written around the year 50, basically gives the same version of Christ's condemnation as that given in the Gospels. He says that "the Jews put Jesus to death" (1 Thessalonians 2:15). Of the events that took place in Jerusalem shortly before his arrival, Paul must have been better informed than we moderns, having at one time tenaciously approved and defended the condemnation of the Nazarene.

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The accounts of the Passion cannot be read ignoring everything that preceded them. The four Gospels attest -- on nearly every page, we can say -- a growing religious difference between Jesus and an influential group of Jews (Pharisees, doctors of the law, scribes) over the observance of the Sabbath, the attitude toward sinners and tax collectors, and the clean and unclean.

Once the existence of this contrast is demonstrated, how can one think that it had no role to play in the end and that the Jewish leaders decided to denounce Jesus to Pilate -- almost against their will -- solely out of fear of a Roman military intervention?

Pilate was not a person who was so concerned with justice as to be worried about the fate of an unknown Jew; he was a hard, cruel type, ready to shed blood at the smallest hint of rebellion. All of that is quite true. He did not, however, try to save Jesus out of compassion for the victim, but only to score a point against Jesus' accusers, with whom he had been in conflict since his arrival in Judea. Naturally, this does not diminish Pilate's responsibility in Christ's condemnation, a responsibility which he shares with the Jewish leaders.

It is not at all a case of wanting to be "more Jewish than the Jews." From the reports about Jesus' death present in the Talmud and in other Jewish sources (however late and historically contradictory), one thing emerges: The Jewish tradition never denied the participation of the religious leaders of the time in Christ's condemnation. They did not defend themselves by denying the deed, but, if anything, they denied that the deed, from the Jewish perspective, constituted a crime and that Christ's condemnation was an unjust condemnation.

So, to the question, "Why was Jesus condemned to death?" after all the studies and proposed alternatives, we must give the same answer that the Gospels do. He was condemned for religious reasons, which, however, were ably put into political terms to better convince the Roman procurator.

The title of "Messiah," which the accusation of the Sanhedrin focused on, becomes in the trial before Pilate, "King of the Jews," and this will be the title of condemnation that will be affixed to the cross: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." Jesus had struggled all his life to avoid this confusion, but in the end it is this confusion that will decide his fate.

This leaves open the discussion about the use that is made of the accounts of the Passion. In the past they have often been used (in the theatric representations of the Passion, for example) in an inappropriate manner, with a forced anti-Semitism.

This is something that everyone today firmly rejects, even if something still remains to be done about eliminating from the Christian celebration of the Passion everything that could still offend the sensibility of our Jewish brothers. Jesus was and remains, despite everything, the greatest gift of Judaism to the world, a gift for which the Jews have paid a high price ...

The conclusion that we can draw from these historical considerations, then, is that religious authorities and political authorities, the heads of the Sanhedrin and the Roman procurator, both participated, for different reasons, in Christ's condemnation.

We must immediately add to this that history does not say everything and not even what is essential on this point. By faith we know that we are all responsible for Jesus' death with our sins.

Let us leave aside historical questions now and dedicate a moment to contemplating him. How did Jesus act during the Passion? Superhuman dignity, infinite patience. Not a single gesture or word that negated what he preached in his Gospel, especially the beatitudes. He dies asking for the forgiveness of those who crucified him.

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And yet nothing in him resembles the stoic's prideful disdain of suffering. His reaction to suffering and cruelty is entirely human: he trembles and sweats blood in Gethsemane, he wants this chalice to pass from him, he seeks the support of his disciples, he cries out his desolation on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

There is one among the traits of this superhuman greatness of Christ that fascinates me: his silence. "Jesus was silent" (Matthew 26:63). He is silent before Caiaphas, he is silent before Pilate, he is silent before Herod, who hoped to see Jesus perform a miracle (cf. Luke 23:8). "When he was reviled he did not revile in return," the First Letter of Peter says of him (2:23).

The silence is broken only for a single moment before death -- the "loud cry" from the cross after which Jesus yields up his spirit. This draws from the Roman centurion the confession: "Truly this man was the Son of God."

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