

GOOD FRIDAY SPELL

Scapegoating the Laity

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Yet another Easter season is approaching as they have recurred for almost 2000 years. The liturgies of Holy Thursday through Easter are the deepest, most renewing and hopeful religious experiences of the Church year... except for the major mischaracterization of the Catholic laity in the Good Friday service.

LAITY BLAMED FOR CLERGY SINS:

The Good Friday liturgy assigns the laity readings which insinuate that the laity was responsible for the framing and killing of Jesus. Moreover, clergy enact Jesus' innocent victimhood. In fact all four gospels really have it the other way around... clergy protective of institutional church power, not the laity, plotted to murder Jesus.

In Scriptures, powerful higher clergy were clearly the people who conspired to falsely accuse, convict and execute Jesus. Clergy even altered their plans because they feared "the people" [the laity] would protect Jesus. So how is it that readings are assigned incriminating the laity as the killers of Jesus?

The Scriptural readings of Jesus' passion are so obviously critical of the intentions of church hierarchy that it is church higher clerics, not laity, who should recite statements made by Jewish clergy.

We must clarify at the onset that good clergy are the backbone of a parish's ministry to 'the Church,' the people of God, through their service, empathetic listening and respectful guidance. We will call dedicated, caring, people-sensitive and responsive clergy '*pastoral clergy*'. Good laity have great respect and appreciation for dedicated pastoral clergy. Quality humane, people-oriented clergy presumably existed among the rabbis of Jesus' day, as do many good, compassionate pastoral clergy in parishes today.

However, Jesus frequently criticized clergy whose need for status and whose protectiveness for institutional church power is at the expense of their compassion and

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God-given humanity. These clergy we will call *‘institutional clergy’* or *‘higher clergy’*. These are clergy for whom church prestige, image, privileges, policies and authority are more important than people and pastoral care. This is the psychology of clerics portrayed in Scriptures as being upset with Jesus’ teaching. A similar impersonal institutional psychology occurs in some of today’s higher clergy who, consciously or subconsciously, feel they are superior to the laity and thus are justified in blaming the laity for the rejection of Jesus, something pastoral clergy do not do.

Nevertheless, today there are some humane hierarchy, as there were in Jesus’ day, some caring searching souls like Nicodemus, even among the Annases, Caiaphases of higher clergy and Sanhedrin.

MISREPRESENTATION IN THE GOOD FRIDAY LITURGY:

Many Catholic Good Friday services includes a dialog recitation of Scriptures for the last hours of Jesus’ life: the last supper, agony in the garden, plotting to arrest Jesus, his trial, sentencing to crucifixion, dying on the cross, and burial. (1)

In recollection of Christ’s Passion, these services assign gospel readings to three different readers: a “narrator” [N], “Christ” [+], and a “crowd” [C]. Over the years “[C]” has been called “crowd”, “congregation” and “chorus” but is usually read out loud by the laity in the pews. Christ’s statements [+] are usually read by the priest. (1)

Laity are expected to recite statements including: “If he were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you,” “We do not have a right to execute anyone,” release “not this one but Barabbas,” “Crucify him, crucify him!” “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God,” “If you release him, you are not a friend of Caesar. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar,” “We have no king but Caesar,” “Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’ but that he said, ‘I am the King of the Jews.’”(1)

In Scriptures, however, all of these statements were said by higher clergy of Jesus’ day, or by those likely paid by them, but not by the laity. The only statements possibly attributed to laity were the demands by “the Jews” in Pilot’s courtyard to “release to us Barabbas not Jesus,” and “Crucify him...” However, one source described Pilot’s courtyard as a small place not holding a lot of people. Also, much of Jesus’ trial before the high priests Caiaphas & Annas took place after midnight in John’s gospel and Jesus was taken to Pilate between about 3-6:00 a.m. (2) Thus, “the Jews” or “the crowd” were not ordinary people [laity] but likely handpicked or bribed by the chief priests. “The chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas...” “Pilot knew it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed him [Jesus] over.” [Mk 15:11-12]

John the Evangelist specifically identifies the “the Jews” who asked for Barabbas and who shouted, “Crucify him,” as “chief priests and the [temple] guards” [Jn 19:4-7] *The Catholic Study Bible* states that St. John’s use of “the Jews” represents “religious authorities hostile to Jesus, unlike the Jewish crowds who sometimes accept Jesus.” (23)

So how is it that the Good Friday service puts institutional clergy's malicious statements in the mouths' of the laity?

BLAMING SOMEONE ELSE FOR JESUS' DEATH:

Before the Second Vatican Council, the Holy Week liturgy blamed all Jews for the unjust conviction, torture and crucifixion of Jesus Christ, calling Jews "accursed killers of Christ." Pope John XXIII and Vatican II improved Catholic views of Jews allowing that, "The crimes during the Passion of Christ cannot be attributed indiscriminately to all Jews..."(3, 4)

Regrettably, not blaming Jewish people has led to implicating Catholic laity for being the killers of Christ. Quality pastoral clergy try not to use this divisive Good Friday dialog.

Commenting on this article, a clergyman said that assigning these readings to laity was likely done innocently enough by the missalette companies to give greater liturgical roles to the laity. An intelligent laywoman said this is *not* a mistake any knowledgeable layperson would ever make.

A missalette company executive editor wrote, "To correct any misimpression...the dialog forms of the passion narrative in our missal... were actually created by the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy (USCCB) for use in missals, not by the publishing companies. We have been faithfully following the exact wording... given in the BCL document, as we are required to do." (22) [USCCB is the US Conference of Catholic Bishops]

Both pre- and post-Vatican II Holy Week liturgies do not suggest higher clergy were involved with Jesus' death.

THOSE WHO CONSPIRED TO KILL JESUS:

In the New Testament, the people who conspired to execute Jesus were the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, elders, chief priests, Sanhedrin and the High Priest. (5) All these held church positions comparable to today's Catholic hierarchy.

"...Judas, one of the twelve arrived; with him was a large crowd... from the chief priests and the elders of the people... Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered... Now the chief priests and the whole [church] council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death." [Mth 26:47, 57 & 59] "It was two days before the Passover... the chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him... but not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people." [Mk 14:1&2]

"Now the festival of ... the Passover was near. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death... they were afraid of the people. [Lk 22:1-2] So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees; they came ... with torches and weapons... So the soldiers, their officer, and the [Chief Priests'] Jewish police arrested Jesus and... took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had

advised the Jews [the chief priests] that it was better to have one person die for the people.” [Jn 18:2,3,12-14]

Without a doubt, all four gospels tell us that institutional clergy-- scribes, Pharisees, elders, Sadducees and the priests, chief priests and High Priest -- were directly responsible for the plot to falsely accuse, arrest and kill Jesus. The institutional religious functionaries of that day deliberately and maliciously arranged Jesus’ death. “The chief priests and the scribes were seeking a way to arrest him by treachery and put him to death.” [Mth 26:3-4, Mk14:1] Priests were Sadducees and scribes were Pharisees. (6, 7) So both Jewish clerical traditions were involved in this plot.

PALM SUNDAY IRONY:

Palm Sunday sermons discuss “Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem” as welcoming crowds adoringly placed palms and their cloaks on the road before Jesus. “The crowds were saying, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David... who comes in the name of the Lord’... ‘This is Jesus the prophet’...” [Mth 21:1-11; Mk 11:1-11] Over the decades some sermons explained how fickle and unfaithful these people were because ‘shortly later’ on Good Friday “these same people were crying out ‘Crucify him’.” This false conclusion presumably demonstrates the laity’s [“the people’s”] unreliable faith in Jesus.

However, if we correctly identify people in the stories, the adoring Palm Sunday crowd was clearly ordinary people on the streets. But those seeking Jesus’ crucifixion on Good Friday are priests, Scribes and Pharisees... quite different people. In fact, on Palm Sunday, “When the chief priests and the scribes saw the wondrous things he was doing, and the children crying out... ‘Hosanna to the Son of David,’ they [priests & Scribes] were indignant.” [Mth 21:14-16] “... They [chief priests] feared him... and were seeking a way to put him to death... because the crowd [the laity] was astonished at his teaching.” [Mk 11:15-18]

Scriptures tell how the high priests even delayed their schemes to kill Jesus “for fear of the people.” [Mth 26:5, Mk 14:2, Lk 22:1-2] Eventually, worry about the laity’s loyalty to Jesus led the institutional clergy to arrest Jesus at night, and to try and convict him all on the same night, thus violating Jewish law for a fair timely public trial.

Therefore, in contradiction to some sermons, there is no evidence that the faith of the “the crowd” [laity] changed between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. Rather, many common people had faith in Jesus, while completely different people, institutionally-protective clergy, were responsible for the cry, “Crucify him!”

CLERGY IN JESUS’ DAY AND TODAY:

The various clerical positions in Jesus’ day have parallels in today’s Roman Catholic Church. This is not surprising since much of the church hierarchical structure originated in Rome around the time of the Emperor Constantine [306-337 A.D.]. (8, 9)

In Jesus’ day the *Sadducees* were a priestly aristocracy with wealth and power who tried to trap Jesus. Sadducees were closely aligned with the Temple in Jerusalem (6, 7) and their roles correspond to today’s Catholic institutional priests in chancelleries and the

Vatican, especially those who seek influential positions and advancement to monsignors, bishops, cardinals and Vatican posts. (10) These tend to favor authoritarian imperial forms of church. Institutional priests often see laity as inferior to clergy. (11, 12)

Pharisees were a religious faction who was hostile to Jesus from the onset. Jesus criticized their strict, pietistic practices because they took the place of compassion for their fellow humans. (6) Pharisees were part of the synagogue tradition. Pharisees “feared that Jesus threatened their positions as religious leaders.” (7) Nearly all *scribes* were Pharisees. Scribes were teachers of the Law. (6) Pharisees and scribes correspond to some of today’s institution-protective theologians, canon lawyers and Vatican bureaucrats for whom church image, regulations, pious practices and prestige are more important than human understanding and compassion. These favor a paternalistic church with an image of changelessness and unwillingness to admit church errors. (13, 14) Just as Tolstoy’s ‘grand inquisitor’ [*Brothers Karamazov*], these clergy fear listening to the Holy Spirit especially as expressed through the laity. (15)

In contrast, Jesus does not criticize rabbis whose devotion and religious service resemble today’s pastoral clergy.

Both Sadducees and Pharisees were the Jewish *elders* who made up the Sanhedrin. The 71-person *Sanhedrin*, situated in Jerusalem, the world center of Judaism, was the highest Jewish religious tribunal and was aligned with the High Priest. (16) “So the chief priests and the Pharisees convened the Sanhedrin and said, “What are we going to do [about Jesus]?” [Jn 11:47]

The Sanhedrin corresponds to powerful commissions within the Vatican Curia: the *chief priests* and the *High Priest* in Jerusalem correspond to powerful cardinals, Vatican bureaucrats and the pope in Rome, the world center of Catholicism. The Sanhedrin and Curia had similar functions in prosecuting suspect heretics. The Curia, through the Congregation of the Holy Office, was involved in the Inquisition which tortured and killed many innocent people, just as the Sanhedrin prosecuted Jesus as a blasphemer and heretic.

These comparisons are important today when Catholic hierarchy has not yet accepted responsibility for their actions in covering up priestly pedophilia, harassing victims’ families, forcing victims to silence, refusing to listen to parents with legitimate responsibilities for children’s safety, and transferring known child-abusing priests to new parishes to victimize still more innocent children. (17, 18)

Sadly bishops’ cover-ups also victimize honest pastoral priests whose dedication and ministries are unfairly devalued by association with uncaring institutional clergy.

In many ways some of today’s Catholic hierarchy helped victimize innocent children and caring parents much as hierarchy in Jesus’ time victimized the innocent Jesus. Their motivations to protect institutional image and power are also similar. Parallels between Jesus’ abusers 2000 years ago are closer to today’s hierarchy than to today’s laity.

RIGHTING A SERIOUS WRONG:

The painful paradox in the Good Friday liturgy is that Catholic laity must portray the killers of Christ while clergy act out the innocence of Jesus. This misrepresentation transfers institutional clerics' guilt onto the laity and onto the marital state in order to insure priestly status.

The laity should no longer allow themselves to be blamed for something some institutional clergy did, the killing of Jesus. The only reasonable response for laity is to refuse to recite these mis-assigned incriminating quotes.

Laity ["the people"] of Jesus' day had no reasons to want Jesus dead, but the higher clergy clearly did. Clergy were concerned about priestly control over laity, political questions relating to the Romans and their dogmatic religious views. Attitudes among some hierarchy have not much changed since Jesus' day. Jesus challenged this institutional thinking and consequently institutional clergy perceived him a threat to their authority. In fact, in Scriptures, institutional clergy were the only people Jesus ever got angry with.

Laity, of course, are not sinless innocents. Nevertheless, Jesus associated with ordinary fishermen, woodworkers, foreigners, tax collectors, farmers, herders, many women, his married disciples, some prostitutes, soldiers, Samaritans [thought by Jews to be an accursed race and religion] and even a few higher clergy such as Nicodemus. Yet Scriptures portrayed none of the ordinary laypeople, except Judas, as falsely accusing and scheming to kill Jesus.

Paradoxically, Scriptures tell that Jesus' last supper was attended by his followers who were mostly married laity. Also the last friends Jesus saw at his crucifixion and the first he appeared to after his resurrection were laywomen.

The simplest remedy to this injustice would be for a bishop to require all clergy in his diocese, including himself, to recite the 'crowd' statements with the congregation. However, a more Scripturally accurate remedy would be for higher clergy to recite these clerical quotes at a reconciliation service where the bishop and other institutional clergy ask forgiveness for the hurts the church institution has caused priests and laity. The Holy Week Chrism mass would be an appropriate service for such a clergy penance service.

SCRIPTURES ALSO APPLY TO HIERARCHY:

Jesus devoted a good deal of his message to exposing bad clergy and bad hierarchy. Jesus calls these institutional clergy "blind guides" and "hypocrites" who mislead innocent people and make his "Father's house a den of thieves." [Mth 23:1-36] Higher clergy were the only people Jesus ever got angry with. And although there was a rabbinical clergy in Jesus' day, he chose not to join them. If Scriptures are to have any meaning, these lessons must be applied to today's institutional clergy and hierarchy.

To be honest to the Scriptures, the presiding monsignor, bishop, cardinal and pope should recite these readings in Good Friday liturgies because they hold clerical roles comparable to clergy who made the statements.

If Scriptures are to have any meaning their stories and moral lessons written 2000 years ago must be applicable today. The Good Friday events are excellent teachings from which to understand today's institutional church problems. Then and now church leaders let understanding, compassion and love be superseded by fear, dogmatism, heartlessness and deception in protecting clerical image and authority. (20) Instead of humble consideration of Jesus' criticisms of higher clerical attitudes, policies and actions, today's hierarchy seems unwilling to admit institutional clerical faults. (21) Instead of respectful solicitation of spiritual and moral insights from good laity, Catholic hierarchy continues to scapegoat the laity, painting their heads with the blood of institutional clerical guilt.

Is it helpful to the salvation of souls to guilt the laity for actions of hierarchy? Quality church relies on mutual respect, honest listening and faith sharing both ways between good clergy and good laity. In a mutually caring exchange, the Holy Spirit can enter into people's lives.

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ADDENDUM: *PENITENTIAL RITE*

A PENETENTIAL RITE FOR HIERARCHY:

Church history provides sufficient reason for the Catholic Church to institute a penance service for clergy.

The hierarchy has given us the inquisition, excommunications that impoverished families and whole villages, selling of indulgences, and a view of sacramental married life as second rate to celibacy. Popes and bishops have supported torture, conversion by the sword, divine rite of kings and popes, slavery, crusades, sending children to wars, buying and selling of church positions, castrati, and mistresses and partners for popes and priests.

Recent examples include the scandal of bishops covering up for pedophile priests to protect the institution's image, and Pope Paul IV's personal prohibition of birth control which betrayed the church's official commission composed of reputable theologians and married laity in order to protect the image that popes never change their minds. (11) And popes have condemned democracy and freedom of conscience, some supported fascism, most refuse to listen to the Holy Spirit speaking from their laity and many considered all women inferior to men and temptresses of celibates. (10) All these examples of hierarchal power are similar to those criticized by Jesus, the strongest criticism of which was that of hypocrisy.

Institutional clergy need to publicly seek forgiveness for the hurtful sins of clerical power committed against the laity and pastoral priests. This rite would emphasize a humble servant role for clergy and counter-balance Roman church tendencies toward an imperial hierarchy that subjugates compassion and charity to clerical power, policies and procedures.

What better time than the Chrisom Mass in Holy Week?

In the Chrisom Mass the [arch]bishop calls together the priests of his diocese, recognizes the value of the priestly ministry and blesses the holy oils for the liturgical year. This would be ideal for the [arch]bishop, cardinal and pope to ask forgiveness from his priests and the people of his diocese for his transgressions, failures to listen, and use of institutional power instead of humane pastoring.