NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

The crucifixion that didn't end on Good Friday

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One thing is certain about this year's Holy Week: Jesus was surely crucified.

Even the most secular person couldn't avoid the media reports of the Roman Catholic church's unfolding legacy of mishandling cases of clerical sexual abuse.

Holy Week is one of those rare times of the year that the church always receives major media attention. Papal statements are given a spot in national nightly news reports; archbishops' sermons are quoted in the papers. But the church was caught in a communications quandary during this round of the scandal. During this crisis-ridden Holy Week, the church could not fall back on its typical response of "no response." Instead, some leaders in the church co-opted the most sacred and central feasts of the liturgical year to defend the pope against accusations that he failed to protect children who had been raped or molested by priests.

And so began some grievous acts of spin.

On Palm Sunday at St. Patrick's Cathedral, following the solemn reading of the Passion according to Luke, Archbishop Timothy Dolan addressed the crisis in his homily by comparing the pope to the Jesus. According to Dolan, the pontiff was "suffering some of the same unjust accusations, shouts of the mob, and scourging at the pillar," and "being daily crowned with thorns by groundless innuendo."

So, are we to understand then that the demands, from both victims and journalists, for honesty, integrity, and transparency from an institution that claims moral leadership, are little more than "angry shouts of a mob" and thorns in the pope's crown?

A week later, the Vatican's celebration of Easter, the central feast of the church year, was more of a "ritual, interrupted," as Cardinal Angelo Sodano opened the Mass with a ringing, highly defensive tribute to the pope. Benedict, whose crown of thorns was replaced by a resplendent gold miter and his scourging pillar transformed into an imperial presider's throne, sat listening intently to this papal pep rally, and warmly embraced Sodano at the conclusion of his encomium.

These breaks with the church's traditional Holy Week rituals seem ironic, especially in light of the pope's Good Friday Stations of the Cross message that decried the rampant spread of secularism. At the Seventh Station, where Jesus falls a second time, Benedict proclaimed: "Jesus is humiliated in new ways even today. When things that are most holy and profound in the faith are being trivialized, the sense of the sacred is allowed to erode. ? Everything in public life risks being desacralized: persons, places, pledges, prayers, practices, words, sacred writings, religious formulae, symbols, ceremonies."

I suppose Dolan and Sodano didn't get this memo when they used their respective symbols and ceremonies to fortify the papal bulwark. Their desks must be as congested as Cardinal Ratzinger's when he served as archbishop.

Though the pope himself avoided addressing the latest crisis directly, the conclusion of his Good Friday message resonated, albeit unwittingly, with the scandal, as he lamented, "We see the most momentous matters placed among trifles? Jesus continues to be ridiculed!"

Many survivors of sexual abuse would agree, and are agonized that their own momentous matters continue to be tossed on the "trifle pile" of the church's desk by a hierarchy that seems more committed to creating spin than atoning for its culpability. If there were a demonstration of the ridicule of Jesus this Holy Week, this would be the moment.

The church leaders are correct: this Holy Week we witnessed the suffering, mockery, and execution of our incarnate God. But the pope is not the one pained and persecuted in this latest round of secrets, cover-ups, abuse, and negligence -- those wounds belong to God and the body of Christ. They are blows dealt by a religious leadership that would allow countless children and teenagers to be violated, and then claim to have been "too busy" with comparatively trivial doctrinal and academic concerns. They are hurts inflicted by a church hierarchy that treats its people with rigid moralism, but refuses to admit its complicity in the suffering of the faithful. They are injuries inflicted by a church leadership that insists on absolute conformity, while refusing to conform not only to the laws of society, but to the laws of the heart that would compel any decent person to protect innocent children from such harm.

Though we read the passion of Jesus on both Palm Sunday and Good Friday last week, the point behind these gospel narratives seems to have been neglected. Jesus' passion and death is a result of deeply human intolerance, anger, lies, and, most of all, fear. His suffering was willed by powerful people, who preferred the black and white certainty of institutionalized religious and cultural beliefs, to the profound challenges of a living, bleeding God.

Jesus was the embodiment of all those things we ought to equate with God: love and justice, care and compassion, truth and goodness, transformation and wholeness. He made real the presence of God by healing people of their afflictions, by unveiling the hypocrisy of moralistic religious leaders, by accepting those ostracized by religious communities, by having dinner with those who no one else seemed to know existed.

When the presence of God -- in love, truth, peace, innocence, reconciliation, healing?is taken away, violated, imprisoned, or snuffed out, we experience a death of God, a reflection of the crucified Jesus in our own time.

The pope concluded his Good Friday prayers by asking God to "Allow us not to drift into the desert of godlessness. Enable us to perceive you in the gentle breeze, see you in street corners."

On this point, I couldn't agree more with Benedict. For those of us who are hungry for justice and thirsty for righteousness, the institutional church is in a time of famine, and offers many of us the sustenance of a desert. We must deepen our own vision to find the ways in which our wounded God is reaching out to us, the ways in which we are experiencing the gifts of church outside of the walls of the church: whether in the calm of the ocean breeze, the homeless mother in the street, or the love and support of family, friends and neighbors.

Holy Week was more like a holy mess for the institutional church. But chaos and upheaval can present a great opportunity for creativity and empowerment. Now is the time when we can seek the ways in which we can heal one another, feed one another, and bring the healing, peaceful presence of God into the lives of one another.

For a brief time, God was embodied on this earth in Jesus. But that doesn't mean that God's body cannot continue to labor in this world through those who seek to stop the crucifixions of love, justice, innocence, truth and compassion. These are not the destructive acts of an angry, shouting mob. This is the work that Jesus, our incarnate God, calls us to do.

Source URL (retrieved on *02/26/2017 - 21:04*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/crucifixion-didnt-end-good-friday