

THE STORY OF CHRIST

BY GIOVANNI PAPINI
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A CROWNED KING

The mercenaries, who (in the provinces) were the majority in the legions, had been waiting for this decision. Throughout the long dispute the soldiers of the Procurator's guard had been obliged to look on, silent and motionless, at this mysterious colonial uproar, of which only one thing seemed clear to them, that their commanding officer was not cutting the best figure. For a while they had been amused by watching the sinister faces, the excitability and the gesticulation of that Jewish swarm; and they had become aware that the Procurator, somber and perplexed, was vainly trying to unravel the tangled threads of this early morning quarrel. They kept their eyes on him, as dogs watch an unskilful hunter, circling about without making up his mind to fire, although the quarry is close at hand.

Now at last something to their taste happened. They were to have their turn at amusing themselves. To flog a Jew, hated by the Jews themselves, was an amusement neither dangerous nor very tiring—just enough to exercise their arms, to stretch the muscles contracted by the morning chill, and to start the blood circulating.

All the company was ordered into the courtyard of the palace, and the white cloak given by Antipas was taken from Jesus' back—the spoils of the enterprise—together with part of His other clothes. The lictors chose the rods, and the strongest among the soldiers snatched at them. They were practical people who knew how to flog energetically and according to the rules.

Jesus, half of His body bared, tied to a pillar, that He might not lessen the force of the blows by bending forward, silently prayed to the Father for the soldiers about to scourge Him. He said to himself: "Love those who hate you, do good to those who persecute you, offer the left cheek to him who has struck the right?" At that moment He could reward his scourgers only by interceding with God for their forgiveness. These soldiers were prisoners as much as He, and they knew not whom they were flogging with such innocent heartiness. They themselves had been flogged sometimes for small breaches of discipline, and they saw nothing out of the way in the fact that the Procurator, a Roman officer had them scourge a delinquent belonging to a subject and inferior race.

Strike hard, O legionaries, for of this blood which now begins to flow, some drops are shed for you. This was the first blood drawn by men from the Son of Man. At the Last Supper His blood had been symbolized by the wine, on the Mount of Olives the blood which mixed with the sweat, stood in drops on His face, came from a suffering altogether spiritual and inner. But now, at last, men's hands shed blood from the veins of Christ; knotty hands of soldiers in the service of the rich and the powerful, hands which wield the scourge before taking up the nails. The livid back, swollen and bloody, was ready for the cross; torn and raw as it was, it would add to the suffering of crucifixion when they stretched it out on the rough wood of the cross. Now they could stop, the courtyard of the cowardly stranger was stained with blood. Servants that very day might wash away those spots, but they would start out again on the well-washed white hands of Pontius Pilate.

The number of blows prescribed had been duly administered, but now, after their taste of amusement, the legionaries did not wish to let their plaything escape at once. All they had done so far was to execute an order; now they wished to have some entertainment of their own. This man, so said the Jews howling out there in the public square, pretended to be a king. Let us give Him His wish, this madman, and thus we will engage those who refuse Him His royal dignity.

A soldier took off his scarlet cloak, the red clams of the legionaries, and threw it over those shoulders, red with blood; another took up a handful of dry thorns, kindling for the brazier of the right watch, twisted a couple of them together like a crown and put it on His head; a third had a slave give Him a reed and forced it into the fingers of His right hand; then, roaring with laughter, they pushed Him upon a seat. One by one, passing before Him, they bent their knees awkwardly, crying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

But some were not satisfied with this burlesque homage, and one of them struck a blow at the cheek, still showing the marks of the fingers of Caiaphas' servants; one, snatching the reed out of His hand, gave Him a blow on the head, so that the thorns of His crown pierced the skin and made about His forehead a border of drops red as His cloak.

They would perhaps have thought of some other amusing diversion if the Procurator, coming up when they were making merry, had not ordered them to lead the scourged King outside. The joke disguise invented by the legionaries fitted in

with the sarcastic intention of Pilate. He smiled, and taking Jesus by the hand, led Him to the crowd of wild animals there, and cried: "Behold the man!"

THE WASHING OF THE HANDS

"Behold the man!" And he turned Christ's shoulders towards that expanse of yelling muzzles that they might see the welts left by the rods, red with oozing blood. It was as if he said: Look at Him, your King, the only King that you deserve, in His true majesty, tricked out as befits such a King. His crown is of sharp thorns. His purple cloak is the clams of a mercenary; His scepter is a dry reed. These are the ornaments merited by your degraded King, unjustly rejected by a degraded people like yourselves. Was it His blood you desired? Here is His blood; see how it drops from the thorns of His crown. There is not much of it, but it ought to be enough for you, since it is innocent blood. It is shed as a great favor to you—to satisfy you. And now be off from here, for you have troubled me long enough!

But the Jews were quieted neither by these words nor by that spectacle. They demanded something quite other than a flogging and a masquerade before they would go their ways. Pilate thought that he could make mock of them, but he would realize that this was no time for feeble jokes. They had had the best of him twice already and they would again. A few bruises and a practical joke played by the soldiery were not enough to punish this enemy of God as He deserved; there were trees in Judea and nails to nail Him to them. And their hoarse voices shouted all together: "Let him be crucified! Let him be crucified!"

Too late Pilate realized that they had driven him into a tangle from which he could not disengage himself. All his decisions were combated with a pertinacity he had not foreseen. By a flash of inspiration he had pronounced the great words, "Behold the man!" But he himself did not understand that proclamation which transcended his base soul. He did not realize that he had found the truth he was seeking: a half-truth, but deeper than all the teachings of the philosophers of Rome and Greece. He did not understand how Jesus was really Man, the symbol of all humanity, sorrowing and humiliated, betrayed by its rulers, deceived by its masters, crucified every day by the Kings who oppress their subjects, by the rich who cause the poor to weep, by priests who think of their bellies rather than of God. Jesus is the Man of Sorrows announced by Isaiah, the man without form or comeliness, despised and rejected of men, who was to be killed for all men; He is God's only son who had taken on man's flesh, and who would ascend in the glory of power and of the new sun, in the midst of the blaring of the trumpets calling the dead to life. But now to the eyes of Pilate, the eyes of the wretched, insignificant man, flesh for rods and for nails, a man and not Man, a mortal and not a God. Why did Pilate lose time with those sibilant remarks before delivering Him to the executioner?

And yet Pilate still did not yield. Standing beside that silent man, the Roman felt his heart heavy with an oppression he had never known before. Who could this man be whom all the people wished to kill, and whom he could neither save nor sacrifice? He turned once more to Jesus. "Whence art thou?" But Jesus gave him no answer. "Speakest thou not unto me? knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee?" Then the insulted King raised His head. "Thou couldst have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin."

Caiaphas and his associates were the guilty ones; the others were dogs incited by Caiaphas, mere tools of Caiaphas. Even Pilate was only an indolent instrument of priestly hatred and of the Divine will. But the Procurator in his perplexity found no new expedient to free himself from the net about him, and returned to his fixed idea, "Behold your King!"

The Jews, infuriated by this repeated insult, burst out, enraged. "If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend; whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar."

At last they had hit on the right word to bring pressure on weak, cowardly Pilate. Every Roman magistrate, no matter how high his rank, depended on Caesar's favor. Pilate's reputation might be ruined by an accusation of this sort, presented with ability, by malicious advocates—and there were plenty of those among the Hebrews, as was shown later by the memorial of Philo. But in spite of the threat, Pilate cried out his last and weakest question, "Shall I crucify your king?"

The High Priests, feeling that they were on the point of winning, answered with their last lie, "We have no king but Caesar."

Pilate surrendered. He was forced to yield unless he wished to start an uproar which might set all Judea on fire. His conscience did not disturb him; had he not tried everything possible to save this man who did not wish to save Himself?

He had tried to save Him by referring the matter to the Sanhedrin, which could not pronounce a death sentence; he had tried to save Him by sending Him to Herod; he had tried to save Him by affirming that he found no fault in Him; he had tried to save Him by offering to free Him in the place of Barabbas; he had tried to save Him by having Him scourged in the hope that this ignominious punishment would pacify them; he had tried to save Him by seeking to arouse a little pity in those hardened hearts. But all his maneuvers had failed, and he certainly did not wish the whole province to rise on account of that unfortunate Prophet; and even less was he willing that on His account they should accuse him before Tiberius and have him deposed.

Pilate thought himself innocent of the blood of this innocent man. And in order that they might all have a visible representation of that innocence which they would not forget, he had a basin of water brought to him and washed his hands there before them all, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just person; see ye to it."

Then answered all the people and said, "His blood be on us, and on our children."

Then released he Barabbas unto them; and when he had scourged Jesus he delivered him to be crucified. But the water which flowed over his hands was not enough to cleanse them. His hands are still blood-stained, and will be to all eternity. He might have saved Christ if he had really wished. Jesus was sent to Golgotha by Pilate's subtleties, by the multiple forms taken by the cowardice of Pilate's soul, poisoned by the irony of skeptics. He would have been less base if he had really believed Christ guilty and had given his consent to the assassination. But he knew that there was no fault in Jesus, that Jesus was a just man as Claudia Procula had said, as he himself had repeated after her. There is no excuse for a man in authority who, fearing for himself, allows a just man to be killed: he holds office in order to protect the just against assassins.

But Pilate said, "I have done everything that I could to save Him from the hands of the unjust. That was not true; he had tried many ways, but not the only way which could have succeeded. He had not offered himself, had not sacrificed himself, had not been willing to risk his dignity and his fortune. The Jews hated Jesus, but they also hated Pilate, who had harassed and denied them so many years later. Instead of proposing the seditious Barabbas in exchange for Jesus, he ought to have proposed himself, Pontius Pilate, Procurator of Judea, and perhaps the people might have accepted the bargain. No other victim except himself would have satisfied the rage of the Jews. It would not have been necessary for him to die. It would have been enough to let them denounce him to Caesar as a traitor. Tiberius would have deposed him and perhaps have banished him, but he would have taken into exile and into disgrace a comforting certainty of innocence. Little did his shifts avail him; for the fate he now sought to avert by giving Jesus over into the hands of his adversaries fell upon him a few years later. The Jews and the Samaritans accused him; the Governor of Syria deposed him, and Caligula banished him to the frontiers of Gaul. But he was followed into his exile by the shade of that great, silent man, assassinated with his consent. In vain had he constructed in Jerusalem the great reservoir full of water, in vain had he washed himself with that water before the multitude. That water was Jewish water, turbid and ill-omened water that did not cleanse. No washing will ever cleanse his hands from the stains left on them by the divine blood of Christ.

TO BE CONTINUED

GENERAL INTENTION FOR JULY

RECOMMENDED AND BLESSED BY HIS HOLINESS POPE PIUS XI.

PARISH LIFE

In the language of the Church, the word "parish" has a very definite meaning. It is a portion of a diocese, under the supervision of a priest who has the spiritual charge of the souls living within its borders, members of the Church whom he prepares for the great passage during their lives and whom he buries after they are dead. A parish is also well pictured as a flock, with a shepherd at its head, on whom rests the responsibility of instructing both lambs and sheep in Christian doctrine, and of conferring upon them the Christian sacraments.

A parish supposes a temple wherein the flock may worship, an altar where Mass is celebrated for their intentions, and where the Heavenly Food is reserved for their spiritual nourishment, a confessional where they may be absolved from their sins, a font where their newly-born may be baptized, a cemetery where they may rest when the struggle of life is over, finally, a register, wherein the details of parish life are consigned. All these matters point to responsibilities both for the parish priest and for those who are under his jurisdiction, and call for an administration, both temporal and spiritual, the procedure of which is outlined in Canon Law.

But we may be assured that it is not to technical matters such as these that the Sovereign Pontiff wished to draw our attention during the present month. It is rather to the ascetic spirit which should animate the lives of the organized flock, who, under their shepherds, are part and parcel of the Universal Church. A parish is a unit in the large visible family of God. Just as in the State the home is the first social unit, so the parish is the initial group, the primary constituent element of that world-wide society known as the Catholic Church. And just as one looks for certain civic virtues in the citizens of a State, loyalty at least to legitimate authority, and devotedness even to sacrifice, if need be, to the public weal; in like manner one looks for certain virtues in the members of a parish; for instance, loyalty to its interests, zeal for its advancement in numbers and influence, willingness to obey its laws and regulations, respect for its pastor—a quality which, when crowned by personal piety at home and charity abroad, make a parish an element of strength both in Church and State.

The parish church, no matter how humble, should be a magnet drawing to itself the devotedness and love of parishioners, for the reason that so many souvenirs that interest them converge within its venerable walls. Thither they were brought to be baptized, thence they shall be taken some day to the grave. And between those two important events, how many other events—first Communion, confirmation, marriage, etc.—have the parish church for their setting! The church should be the center of activity in a parish, as the beehive is center of activity in a flower-garden. If parishioners were only as assiduous in their sphere as the tiny money-getters are in theirs, what flourishing parishes we should have!

Seeing that parishes are organized and kept up for the purpose of promoting piety and good living among Catholics, it is worth while to ask ourselves how this end may be attained. A modern writer informs us that the essence of sound parish life depends mainly on the observance of two things: the holy days. At first sight one may not see the connection, but if he reflects a moment, he will find a reason for the assertion. After all, the great religious and social function that draws parishioners together and proclaims their solidarity is the Solemn High Mass in the parish church. This function gives them the opportunity once a week, and sometimes oftener, of making a public confession of their faith; it helps them to mingle instruction with personal piety, and at the same time enables them to observe a precept of the Church.

While, strictly speaking, this precept is fulfilled by going to even a Low Mass, still parishioners should try to observe it in its integrity. One may have his choice in the matter of Mass on Sundays and holy days, but the parish spirit calls for a little more sacrifice of time, a little more expenditure of time, a little more abnegation of self, a little more generosity to God, on the part of the faithful. High Mass cuts deeply into Sundays and holy days—one of the reasons undoubtedly why it is not popular—but it is at the High Mass that the doctrines of salvation are formally proclaimed, that the flock hear, officially and were, what their duties are as Catholics. Judging by the scanty attention at this important function in many parishes, we fear that the obligation of hearing sermons is too often ignored; and yet there never was a time when Christian instruction was so necessary. Sources of corruption of mind and heart abound everywhere. Printing presses are daily belching out tons of reading matter which sows the seeds of infidelity and loose living to the four corners of the world. What real antidote is there except the Sunday sermon? Undoubtedly we have our Catholic literature and our newspapers, and parishioners should read and study and inform themselves privately, but there seems to be a special efficacy attached to the Sunday sermon, a class among the sacramentals when performed by those who are officially appointed to impart the Words of Life to famishing souls and to direct their steps in the spiritual struggle.

The obligation of hearing instruction on Sundays and holy days cannot be too strongly insisted upon; for even though we already know what is told us, knowledge is a light which quickly goes out unless the flame is assiduously fed. We keep in mind what we have learned only by learning it over again; we retain a knowledge of heavenly truths and of the religious obligations springing therefrom, only by hearing them over and over again. Reading and study are precious aids, if you will, and should be encouraged, but it must not be forgotten that the ordinary means instituted by our Lord Himself for the spread of the Gospel and for the strengthening of souls in virtue was not reading but hearing. "Faith comes by hearing," St. Paul told the Romans, and the great Apostle was an authority on whom we may rely. If preaching

is necessary for engendering the faith in our intellects, it is also necessary for keeping it fresh in our hearts. The Church has always interpreted her duty to her children in this way, and this is really one of the reasons why the faithful are divided into small groups, why parishes are organized, why churches are built. Catholic populations are divided into parishes precisely in order that pastors may be able to do the more conveniently to teach them their duties to God and their neighbor. If then a parish priest is obliged by his office to preach the Gospel and instruct his people adequately, it was never the intention of the Church that he should preach to empty pews. It has been said that people who try to avoid long sermons are usually the ones who need them the most. In view of this, one may ask whether the reading of a few parish notices at a Low Mass on Sunday morning and a short ten minute instruction are all that the Church requires her children to hear.

The Sunday High Mass, with its accompanying sermon, helps to keep the flock together and provides a healthy parish spirit. But this can hardly be all that parishioners are called upon to do. When people never enter a church where the Lord resides except to fulfil a Mass precept which obliges under pain of sin, they reveal an inclination to follow the line of least resistance in spiritual things, a very unhealthy sign in view of the interests that are at stake. The Church, it is true, does not oblige us to assist at Vespers and Benediction and other similar functions, but if we measure our generosity in God's service only by the sum of our obligations we are rather lame Catholics. One can usually judge the vigor of spiritual life and the fervor of a parish, not merely by the way the precepts are fulfilled, but also by the way the counsels are observed.

Again, it is essentially in the spirit of parish life to take an interest in the societies and other organizations that are established therein, for they are usually societies in which zeal is exercised and piety cultivated. They are all means of grace and strength to souls.

Parish life reveals a family spirit wherein one takes a deeper interest in the members of his own family than in those of his neighbors. This is quite natural. But it would be taking a narrow view of parish life which would frown down outside efforts made for the welfare of the Church in general. It is Catholic charity to help those who have not advantages we ourselves possess. A parishioner who, under the plea that he has his share of church debts, parish dues, etc., to meet, will object to contributing his mite to help a poor parish, foreign mission, or some other good work, is one who will not deign to look beyond the horizon of his own parish has not the true Catholic spirit. He should be told that the world is wider than his parish and that what is spent in helping God's kingdom anywhere is not spent in vain.

Many other phases of the parish life might be considered, but enough has been written for our readers to understand what is aimed at in the present intention. To suffice it to say that parish life in its true meaning is an earnest of Catholic solidarity and strength. The spectacle of a shepherd and his flock working in the close union that springs from charity, is one that rejoices God and His angels. This union should be the aim of all Catholics.

E. J. DEVINE, S. J.

If we walk before God in truth, uprightness and purity of heart we have no reason to fear.—Life of St. Teresa.

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