

# The Death of Christ — An Unsolved Crime?

Last week I used this column to comment on the modern 'Jesus Movement' and wrote in defense of "Godspell," a current Broadway play which presents a Gospel of good news proclaimed by a Jesus whose divinity seems never in doubt. I contrasted this production with the popular 'Jesus Christ Superstar' which emphasizes the weakness of His humanity.



Another and most serious challenge to the whole Jesus Movement centers not so much on the question, "Who is this Jesus now so popular — is He God or Man?", but rather, "Who Crucified Him?"

"Jesus Christ Superstar" has recently received some strong criticism as a vehicle for anti-Semitic bias. The American Jewish Committee commissioned a Presbyterian educator, Gerald Strober, to give an analysis of the play. His conclusions form this indictment: "In arbitrarily laying nearly all of the abuse on a group which the viewer knows to be Jewish whether the text says so or not, 'Jesus Christ Superstar' is, if nothing else, insufficiently thoughtful, potentially mischievous

and possibly a backward step on the road toward improved Christian-Jewish relations."

The analysis seems to proceed most fairly as Strober compares the New Testament, the unique source of information about Jesus' life and death, with certain episodes in the play. He leaves no doubt in my mind that the play is less than fair in depicting the role of Jewish individuals and institutions as we know them from scripture.

In some instances, the emotional coloring is deepened to make the Jewish people and their conduct appear more sinister than the gospel record warrants. In other instances, historical facts are enlarged, modified or glossed over to create black-vs.-white contrasts where the record indicates only gray tones.

More important, the play bypasses the depths of the meaning of Christ's Passion. Christian belief assures us that all humanity — then, now, and always — contribute to Jesus' death by their sins. All of us must approach Calvary as a criminal returning to the scene of his crime. A familiar Negro spiritual poses a valid question: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" The answer deep in our hearts must be an emphatic, "Yes."

Every authentic representation of the

Passion should encourage the audience to identify with the Crucifixion. This becomes impossible when a play shuffles the responsibility for the death of Jesus among the various human agents and paints those it singles out for major culpability in such dark colors that, at best, the viewer cannot identify with them and, at worst, will regard them as the enemy.

The famous Oberammergau Passion Play was criticized a few years ago for the same shifting of responsibility for Jesus' death. Rabbi Marc H. Tannenbaum, National Director of Interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee, described its misrepresentation of the New Testament account: "The guilt for Jesus' death has been ascribed solely to Jesus' Jewish contemporaries or, worse, to the Jewish people as a whole. . . . these performances have helped perpetuate some of the most baneful myths in history."

The Season of Lent invites all of us to meditate on the Passion and Death of Christ, to stand in spirit beneath the Cross of Christ to absorb some of what St. Thomas Aquinas described as the great source of wisdom. Surely such meditation will point to the culprit and force us to say: "Yes, I was there at Calvary and I helped to crucify the Victim by my sins." This is the only verdict that reflects the truth.

By Father John A. Morgan

Guest Columnist

## Penance! Penance! Penance!

With the approach of Lent some Catholics are getting uneasy. Not at the prospect of 40 days of strict fasting. Rather, they are wondering: "What has happened to penance in the Church? No more Fast days, except Ash Wednesday and Good Friday; no more Friday abstinence except during Lent. Is penance one of the things that got thrown out when Pope John opened the windows to let some fresh air into the Church?" If it is, it is not the Church that has done it. Maybe it is those



in the Church who feel that penance is outdated, that "all you need is to love others, be involved in relevant situations, work at meaningful encounters, be committed to the needy."

The Church has not eliminated penance. If you think so, then read this. "It is important to impress on the minds of the faithful not only the social consequences of sin, but also the fact that the real essence of the virtue of penance is hatred for sin as an offence against God; the role of the Church in peni-

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tential practices is not to be passed over, and people must be exhorted to pray for sinners." (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy) "The Church invites all Christians without distinction to respond to the divine precept of penance by some voluntary act, apart from the renunciation imposed by the burdens of everyday life." (Pope Paul, Constitution on the Practice of Penance)

True penance means a change of heart, a change of mind, a turning from sin to God. But, as the U.S. bishops point out, this inward conversion must show itself in exterior acts. This is what John the Baptist told the people who came to receive his baptism: "Produce fruits to match repentance." The external actions may vary from age to age, from place to place, and according to the sins people wish to make amends for. "The practice of penance should be fostered according to the possibilities of the present day, and of a given area, as well as of individual circumstances" (Const. on Sacred Liturgy). "The Church, always attentive to the signs of the

times, seeks new expressions more suitable for the realization of the precise goal of penance according to the character of various epochs." (Pope Paul)

The prophet Isaiah castigated the people of his day for their hypocrisy in doing penance. "On your fast day you carry out your own pursuits; your fast ends in quarrelling and fighting. This rather is the fasting God wishes: setting free the oppressed, sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked and not turning your bread with the hungry, sheltering the on fasting and abstinence, the Church is trying to show us that there are also other ways of expressing our repentance.

During one of her visits to Bernadette at Lourdes, our Blessed Mother said: "Penance! Penance! Penance!" It was the same message her Son preached in Palestine. It is the same message His Church is preaching today. The Church has not given up penance. She is merely trying to give us a new insight into the real meaning of penance — a turning from sin to God and an external expression of this in ways that are meaningful in our day.

Editorial

## The Trouble Becomes a Full-Blown Tragedy

It well could amount to belaboring the obvious to cite the parallels between the Indochina War and the open conflict in Northern Ireland.

Both involve outside powers (although Britain admittedly has stronger historical ties to Belfast than the United States to Saigon) being called in by governments which have caused at least some of their own trouble by ignoring the civil rights of their people.

Both nations exposed themselves to strong criticism over such tragedies as at My Lai and at Londonderry. Each instance involved visiting soldiers firing on home civilians and in each case claiming provocation.

In the My Lai, the United States inves-

tigated and aired at public trial the now historic Lt. Calley case, in which some blame was fixed.

Now we have a similar situation concerning Londonderry; the official Army statements strikingly close to those of the accused at My Lai.

A British officer placed the responsibility on a "hooligan element" which he said opened attack on his troops first. Catholics, and unfortunately the festering religious hatred in Northern Ireland has boiled over as result of this overheated and everextended fight for civil rights, say this is not true.

A Catholic priest on the scene said the soldiers "fired indiscriminately and everywhere around them without provocation."

Admittedly, emotion, tension, hatred and fear are playing too large a part in trying to put together what actually happened. Therefore, it is imperative that the investigation begun by the British be fully open and painstakingly impartial.

On the long range, it is becoming evident that outside intervention in such disputes often only fans the heat. Those around the world who have for so long pushed for the end of U.S. intervention in Indochina should find cause to seek the same result as regards the British. The position that their departure would set off holocaust in Ulster is again similar to the argument that U.S. departure would invite atrocities in Vietnam. In each case it may be asked: Has their presence prevented same?