

Cross can be the cost of conscience

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Why was Jesus crucified? It's a question for all seasons, not just for Lent or Good Friday.

Some might reply, "To save us from our sins." But that doesn't answer the question; it only begs another.

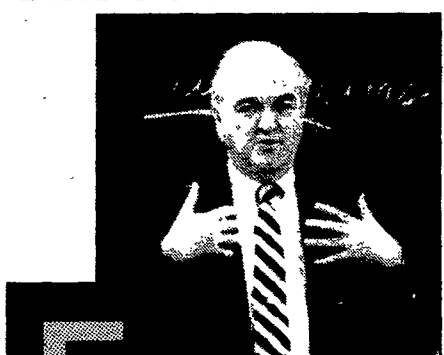
Of course, we believe as Christians that Jesus' death on the cross was a saving act. Indeed, he had to die so that the resurrection, which is at the heart and center of the whole paschal mystery, could occur: "...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

However, the Roman and Jewish leaders who conspired to send him to Calvary weren't knowing instruments of God. No angels were sent their way to give them clear and precise instructions: "You must crucify this Jesus of Nazareth, for he is the Son of God and by his death the whole world will be saved."

How, then, did these unlikely allies — occupiers and occupied — ever come to agree that Jesus should be nailed to a cross and left there until dead?

To put the question in another way: what had Jesus said or done that created for him enemies of such fierce intensity and determination?

To be sure, the enmity developed slowly. At first, Jesus came across as a traditional law-abiding Jew. He was in the synagogue on the Sabbath (Mark 1:21; 6:2), went on pilgrimage



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during the festivals (Luke 2:41-52; John 2:13; 5:1; 7:14; 10:22, 12:12; Mark 11:1-11), taught in the synagogues and in the Temple (for example, Mark 1:39; 14:49; John 6:59; 7:14; 8:20).

He celebrated the Paschal feast in the traditional way with his disciples (Mark 14:12-16; Luke 22:14-23), wore the prescribed tassels on his cloak (Mark 6:56; Luke 8:44), sent lepers to show themselves to the priests in accordance with the Law (Mark 1:44; Luke 17:14). Indeed, he insisted that he had come not to destroy the Law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17).

Over time, however, Jesus found himself frequently at odds with the teachers of the Law. Had there been a Latin word to describe them, it would have been "magisterium."

He insisted that the Sabbath was made for men and women, not men

and women for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). Thus, in spite of his reverence for the Law, he never placed the Law over the good of people. This is why Jesus is the preeminent model for pastoral ministers.

He challenged the traditional notion that every part of the Law was of equal importance and that external observance is what finally counted (Mark 7:14-23).

He attacked the Pharisees for straining at gnats and swallowing camels, and for neglecting the weightier matters of the Law: justice, mercy and good faith (Matthew 23:23). He was especially intolerant of their hypocrisy (23:4, 28).

In the end, Jesus' death makes sense only if we accept the Gospel portrait of him as accurate and reliable. To suggest, as some have done, that he was executed because of his political attitudes and behavior toward the Roman government does not correspond with his preaching against violence, his obvious indifference to specifically political questions, and his central and oft-repeated teaching about love for one's enemies.

Moreover, Jesus' problem was primarily with the Jews, not with the Romans. But he was not at odds with all Jews, only with their leaders: the chief priests, the Pharisees and the Scribes.

They despised and feared him because he functioned as a prophet greater than Moses and claimed to forgive sin. They charged him with blasphemy.

In their eyes, Jesus was a dangerous

dissenter, a rebel, an underminer of established authority — their authority.

And yet he was himself a person subject to authority and obedient to it. But it was the authority of God to which he was subject, and it was the Kingdom, or reign, of God — a reign of justice and peace — to which he was obedient.

"In spite of this obedience," the late Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner once wrote, "...the life of Jesus reaches its climax in conflict with the religious authority of the chosen people, Christ's own people, and he accepts this conflict as that disposition decreed for him by the Father and foretold in this people's Sacred Scripture (Matthew 21:33-45; 26:54, 56; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19; 22:37)" (*Obedience and the Church*, p. 10).

In other words, Jesus' disobedience to religious authority was itself an act of obedience to God — for which he paid the highest price one can pay.

In our own time, one expects religious authority to be faithful to the Gospel and, therefore, worthy of adherence. But for those infrequent occasions where conscience may dictate otherwise, Jesus remains the model par excellence.

The Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom insisted that no one is "to be forced to act in a manner contrary to one's conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is one to be restrained from acting in accordance with one's conscience, especially in matters religious" (n. 3).

That's not lightly said. The cost of conscience can sometimes be a cross.

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