

Column on crucifixion caused stir

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

I did a column in mid-October on why Jesus was crucified. I pointed to Jesus' conflicts with the teachers of the law, his challenging of certain interpretations of the law, and his criticism of the Pharisees for neglecting justice, mercy, and good faith, while "straining at gnats and swallowing camels."

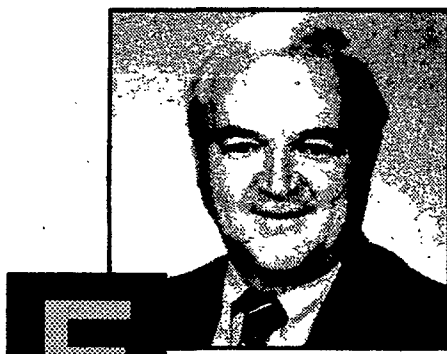
"Jesus' problem," I wrote, "was with the Jews, not with the Romans. But not with all the Jews, only their leaders: the chief priests, the Pharisees and the scribes." I quoted the late Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner in support of the argument.

A few weeks later I received a very thoughtful letter from Dr. Eugene Fisher, of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs in Washington, D.C.

Fisher was concerned that the column had "rather uncritically lumped together a variety of highly distinctive groups" (the chief priests, the Pharisees and the scribes) under the single title, "teachers of the law," as if they all agreed with each other on everything.

In fact, the Sadducees, who supported the Temple aristocracy, and the Pharisees, who were lay dissenters in this period, disagreed on a number of fundamental issues. Jesus and his disciples were, in fact, closer to the latter than to the former.

Fisher noted that even Matthew, who launched the most consistent anti-Pharisaic polemic of the New Tes-



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tament, did not blame them for the crucifixion.

Karl Rahner, Fisher suggested, may have been "unintentionally speaking more out of ancient anti-Judaic stereotype than out of contemporary biblical scholarship" when he wrote the lines I had quoted in the original column. Jesus' teachings and actions clearly brought him into conflict with some Jewish religious leaders of his time, but not all, and certainly not against the Jewish people as a whole.

In his letter's closing paragraph, Fisher assured me that he recognized that column's real purpose, "which is about Catholics, not Jews, and about the Church's magisterium, not New Testament exegesis." His own important work in Catholic-Jewish dialogue, however, makes him, as he readily con-

ceded, "a tad sensitive about these matters."

When I showed my column and Fisher's letter to two of my colleagues here at Notre Dame, one in New Testament and the other in Judaica, I got two very different reactions. One colleague thought the column generally accurate (he would have recommended a change of a word here and there), while the other was more sympathetic with the reservations expressed.

After consulting two other biblical scholars, one here at Notre Dame and one outside the university, and after doing some further reading and reflection on the matter, I decided to do this follow-up column to help clarify the record.

It is not accurate to say, as I did, that "Jesus' problem was with the Jews, not with the Romans." Jesus was crucified for political as well as religious reasons, although Scripture scholars remind us that it is often practically impossible to separate the two.

His sharp criticisms of the temple priesthood and the financially costly temple system — criticisms that were in the tradition of the Jewish prophets of old — not only alienated some Jewish leaders, especially the Sadducees, but the Romans as well. In being a threat to the temple priests, Jesus was also a threat to Rome's power, since Rome had appointed the chief priests and even controlled the priestly vestments.

Jesus was indeed crucified for having offended some of his Jewish con-

temporaries, Oxford biblical scholar E.P. Sanders argues, but his sentence to death had less to do with his arguments about the law than with his attack upon the Temple. And in attacking the Temple, he was also attacking the local Roman government.

"With regard to the actual cause of Jesus' death," Sanders writes, "I remain impressed by the fact that he was not executed until after the demonstration in the temple, but that then he was executed immediately" (*Jewish Law From Jesus to the Mishnah*, Trinity Press International, 1990, p.94).

Sanders also cites Jesus' expressed hopes for the Jewish kingdom's restoration as an important contributing factor. Though Jesus made clear that his kingdom was "not of this world" (John 18:36), his emphasis on the coming kingdom was regarded as potentially dangerous since it might inspire rioting and insurrection. Moreover, his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, if it came to the attention of the high priest, would have warned him that this danger actually existed.

In essence, Jesus' preaching about the coming kingdom, his sayings about the Temple's destruction, and finally his overthrowing of the temple tables "provided all the evidence that was needed for Jesus' execution."

For those who wish to explore this important issue further, Fisher recommends a new collection of essays which he helped to edit, *Within Context: Essays on Jews and Judaism in the New Testament* (The Liturgical Press, 1993).

Wanted: A new kind of spiritual direction

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

"I'd like to have you help me explore my spirituality without directing me toward the traditional, contemplative disciplines."

That is how I approached a priest friend of mine recently when I asked him to become my spiritual director. (Yes, Virginia, lay people can have spiritual directors, although most of us don't. I haven't had one since I left the seminary 25 years ago.)

Recently, I've been feeling that my spiritual life has been going nowhere and that I should get some help. I resisted, however, because most "spirituality" offered these days is a variation on the "get away from the world



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and discover God" theme. "Silence, solitude and surrender" is the ideal in these spiritualities, when what I am looking for is a spirituality of "noise, crowds and activism."

Like many lay people these days, I find my days extremely busy. I own and run a small business with a partner; my wife, Kathy, and I have three small children; we are both involved in a variety of church and community activities. The advice to "stop and smell the roses" that is the basis for so much spiritual advice today is not always helpful to me.

Go on a retreat? Kathy, who is home with the children all week, gets no help from me that weekend.

Get up an hour earlier to meditate? I'm often tired and cranky as it is.

So go to bed an hour earlier? Then Kathy and I would lose the only time of the day we are alone together.

Skip my lunch hour and pray? I need to do business over lunch most days.

I need a spirituality that will help me find the meaningful, the eternal, the transcendent, the divine in the midst of the hustle and bustle of daily life — not away from it.

So, as my new year's resolution, I approached a priest and asked him to be my spiritual director — but only if he would help me explore this new kind of spirituality. He was intrigued and agreed. We set up a monthly schedule of meetings, which began in January.

Periodically this year, I'll let you know how it goes.



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from the beauty that is seen
to what is beyond, always
kindles the desire for the
hidden through what is
perceived.'**

—St. Gregory of Nyssa

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