

WORLD & NATION

Young man's remains offer clues about crucifixion

By Judith Sudilovsky
Catholic News Service

JERUSALEM — For some 800 years, people were crucified by the hundreds of thousands all over North Africa, Western Asia, Great Britain and Europe.

But only one skeletal remain has been found to provide evidence of this cruel punishment.

In 1968, soon after the Six Day War, an Israeli team of archaeologists working in northern Jerusalem discovered the remains of a young man named Yehohanan ben Hagkol, with a nail piercing the right heelbone. The left heelbone was too destroyed to be able to determine whether it also had been pierced. There were also signs of crucifixion on the wristbones.

Ben Hagkol was in his mid 20s when he died sometime between 7 and 70 A.D. Jesus Christ was crucified approximately in the year 30 A.D.

According to ancient Jewish tradition, the nail used to crucify a man was a powerful amulet. So, most of the nails used in crucifixions were removed once the person was taken down from the cross and were sold for their protective powers.

However, since the nail used for ben Hagkol was bent, it had apparently been impossible to extract from the bone, said archaeology Professor Vassilios Tzaferis. The professor took part in the original excavations, and is director of excavations and surveys at the Israel Antiquities Authority.

A replica of the heelbone pierced by the nail is in a special exhibit at the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem. The real bones were given a Jewish burial after being studied.

"Crucifixion was one of the most obscene, degrading forms of punishment ever devised," said anthropologist Joe Zias of the Israel Antiquities Authority. "First of all, the person was beaten badly, blinded, stripped and then he was put on the cross. Sometimes he was tied and sometimes he was nailed."

"He could be left up there for minutes, days or weeks, de-



CNS/Reuters
Poles reenact the crucifixion of Jesus during an annual Passion Play March 23 in the small village of Gorka Klasztorna in northwestern Poland.

pending on how they did it. There was no one way to crucify a person," Zias said.

In the mid-1980s, a professor of pathology at Columbia University conducted a controlled experiment, with volunteers using secure safety belts, to determine the effects of crucifixion on the human body.

If the legs or buttocks were given support, a person could survive for days on the cross. If there was no support the person could die within minutes or hours, Zias said. Some

people were crucified with their arms suspended above their heads, providing quick death by asphyxiation. The muscles needed for breathing would become progressively weaker and the person, although able to inhale, could not exhale and would choke.

A person was nailed to the cross would have died of hypovolemic shock — an entire shutdown of the body's system, Zias said.

"There is no way of knowing how Jesus was crucified," he said. "The Bible only says he was crucified."

The method used for crucifixion depended on how many crucifixions the Romans needed to do. During the Jewish revolt in the years 66-73 A.D., they crucified up to 500 Jews a day on the Mount of Olives until they ran out of wood and trees, Zias said. Sometimes crucifixions were used as a form of celebration. One day in Rome, some 6,000 people were crucified to celebrate victory after the revolt led by Spartacus, he noted.

"During times of rebellions, the legal processes for crucifixions were not followed, but there were laws regarding crucifixion," Tzaferis noted. "Jesus Christ had a trial, so we can assume his crucifixion was also according to the rules. They would have beaten him and they would have made him carry the horizontal bar to the place of crucifixion. The vertical bar would already have been in a fixed place."

He said crosses used in crucifixions could have been in the shape of a "T" or an "X" or a cross, with the horizontal bar positioned near the middle of the vertical bar.

Although many classical paintings show Jesus with nails through the palms of his hands, it is physiologically impossible for the body of a grown person to be supported by nails there, Zias said. The nails must go through the wrists.

Many pagans mocked early Christians with the crucifixion of Jesus, Zias said, asking how he could be the Son of God if he had died such a degrading death. Because of this, many early paintings depict a triumphant Jesus facing the cross. It wasn't until the 14th century that paintings began to show a suffering Jesus, he said.

Abortion group among 'We Are Church' co-sponsors

By David Finnigan
Catholic News Service

LOS ANGELES — The "We Are Church" referendum, currently confronting criticism for obscuring its affiliation with Catholics for a Free Choice, has extended its deadline for signatures.

Critics have pointed out that the petitions and other referendum advertisements do not list the campaign's affiliation with Catholics for a Free Choice.

Meanwhile, referendum leaders have extended the deadline for gathering one million signatures until October, acknowledging that thus far they have not gotten as many signatures as they had hoped.

The referendum advocates changes in church policy on women's ordination, priestly celibacy, married clergy, homosexuality and sexual matters like birth control.

In an interview with Catholic News Service, referendum national coordinator Sister Maureen Fiedler said Catholics for a

Free Choice — an abortion lobby group condemned by the Vatican and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops — is among about 10 referendum co-sponsors.

"As a church reform movement, we make no apologies whatsoever for our association with Catholics for a Free Choice," she said. "All of us think that abortion should be a point of dialogue in the church Whether you agree or disagree with CFCC, all of us agree that they put out a theological view that needs to be heard."

Sister Fiedler, a Sister of Loretto, said her own opinion on abortion was "not relevant to what we're talking about."

Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Thomas J. Curry said he thinks the referendum movement's connection to Catholics for a Free Choice means it "is certainly not a Catholic movement."

The referendum's advocates, he said, "have associated themselves with one movement on one extreme of Catholicism. They couldn't possibly appeal to a large segment

of Catholics."

Catholics for a Free Choice was denounced in 1993 by the U.S. bishops' 50-member Administrative Committee, which said the group "merits no recognition or support as a Catholic organization" and is funded mostly by non-Catholic sources.

Sister Fiedler also announced that the deadline to obtain one million signatures for the referendum has been extended to October, five months past its original deadline of this May's Pentecost.

"We've decided basically to extend our work through then and receive signatures," Sister Fiedler said.

October is the 35th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council.

In Rome at that time, U.S. referendum activists will join with other groups calling for similar changes in the church for "what might loosely be called witnessing events," Sister Fiedler said. Only then, she said, would the signature total be announced.

Similar referendums in Germany and Austria claimed to have garnered more than two million Catholic signatures.

Since the American push started last year, the referendum's success has been difficult to gauge. Sister Fiedler will not give progress reports on the number of signatures gathered.

"We're not releasing any numbers until October. I'm not going to give you numbers," Sister Fiedler said. Signature sheets do not ask specifically if the signer is Catholic or ask for a parish affiliation or home phone number, seeking only a signer's name and address.

Sister Fiedler would not reveal if the campaign has reached the 500,000 or 250,000 signature mark.

"I certainly don't have as many as I'd like, that I can tell you," she said.

Last November at the Call To Action conference in Detroit, Sister Fiedler said the signature drive was "not going as rapidly as I thought it would."

In February, "We Are Church" activists in about 10 cities stood outside churches seeking signatures. Sister Fiedler told CNS at that time that she gathered 80 names outside New York City's St. Patrick's Cathedral.

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