

COLUMNISTS

Medical journal explores how Jesus died

Q. I am not a physician, but through my profession I do have some medical knowledge. We are told that Jesus suffered much in the scourging and carrying of the cross, and while he was on the cross.

This may be a stupid question, but what did he actually die of? I realize there were no doctors or scientists there to report what happened.

Since even Pontius Pilate was surprised he died so soon, there must have been something different about his death. (Massachusetts)

A. First, let me assure you there may be a lot of stupid answers around, but there is no such thing as a stupid honest question.

Yours has been addressed often through the centuries. Usually, of course, the response reflected the state of scientific information at the time.



question corner

By FATHER JOHN DIETZEN

To my knowledge, the best study of the subject in light of modern medical science was produced by two members of the medical staff of the Mayo Clinic with two Methodist clergymen. It appeared in the March 21, 1986, issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Their study deals with the entire passion story, starting with Gethsemane.

The final section speaks directly to your question and is the source of most of what follows.

As you note, that Jesus' death, occurred in so few hours amazed Pilate himself (Mk. 15:44). The process of dying by crucifixion could continue for many hours, even days.

This fact, coupled with the loud cry (reported by Matthew and Mark) just before he died, suggests that some sort of catastrophic event caused his death.

It may have been a rupture of the heart. The massive physical and emotional traumas of the previous 24 hours may have caused "non-infective thrombotic vegetations" to form on the mitral or aortic valves. These could dislodge into the heart's blood supply system, causing a rupture in the cardiac muscle wall, and nearly immediate death.

Perhaps a more likely explanation is

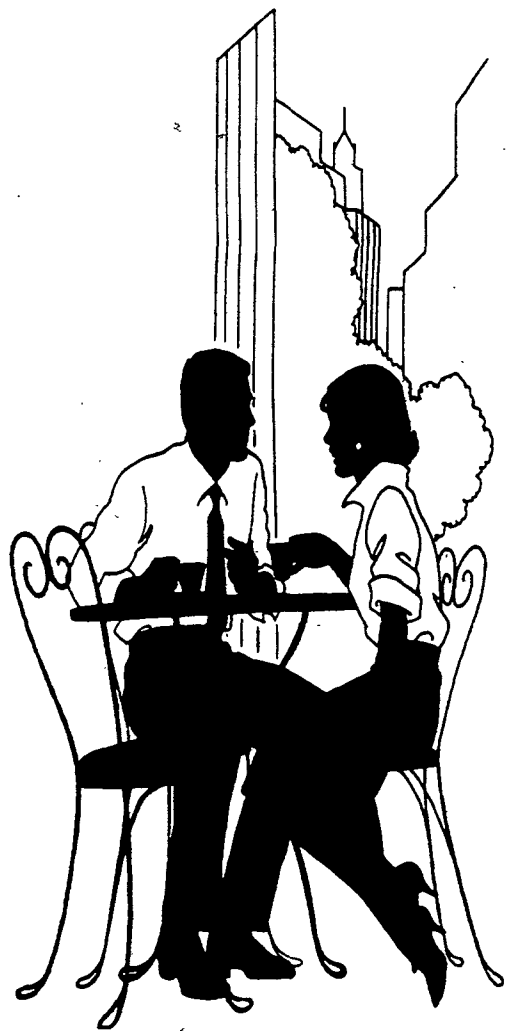
simple terminal exhaustion, resulting from loss of blood and severe shock during the scourging a few hours before and from the painful struggle to breathe as his body weakened on the cross.

This would cause him to die relatively quickly, too exhausted to even take another breath, from some form of acute heart failure, perhaps a fatal cardiac arrhythmia.

So apparently, as modern medicine analyzes it, either cardiac rupture or cardiorespiratory failure finally killed our Lord, bringing him to the moment when, in John's powerful words, "he handed over the spirit," and died (Jn. 19:30).

...
Father Dietzen is pastor of Holy Trinity Church, 704 N. Main St., Bloomington, Ill. 61701. Questions for this column may be sent to him at that address.

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