

And They Crucified Him

by Scott L. DeBoer



photo by Beth Hart

“We believe in one God. . . . He suffered, died, and was buried . . .” Each week, Catholics profess this truth, but do we really think about what we just said? When we think of crucifixion, we usually think of the physical nailing to the cross. However, the nails were just a small part of the “the utterly vile death of the cross.”¹

Contrary to popular belief, the Romans did not invent crucifixion. But in their attempts to inflict a slow death with maximum pain and suffering, they perfected it. By the time of the birth of Jesus Christ, crucifixion was a common Roman practice, with sometimes hundreds of people being crucified every day for such crimes as high treason, murder, and political rebellion.

“Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.” And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground (Lk. 22:42-44).

The actual suffering of Our Lord’s Crucifixion began long before He was nailed to the Cross. He must have dreaded the thought of it throughout His whole life. Jesus was aware of everything that was to come because of His divine omniscience and just by simply living in a time when the witnessing of crucifixions was commonplace. The Greek term for “agony” means an active struggle, fight, wrestling. Christ had such a severe mental struggle in the garden that He developed a rare and well-documented medical condition known as hematomidrosis. Remember that St. Luke, the physician, was notably the only apostle to record the appearance of Jesus sweating blood (cf. Lk. 22:44). This medical condition involves rupturing of the skin capillaries with

“The Greek term for ‘agony’ means an active struggle, fight, wrestling. Christ had such a severe mental struggle in the garden that He developed a rare and well-documented medical condition known as hematomatosis.”

subsequent bleeding into the sweat glands. These hemorrhages caused the skin to be severely tender, and escalated the later sufferings in Christ’s scourging.

Then Pilate took Jesus and scourged him (Jn. 19:1).

A scourging or “flogging” was a legal prerequisite to all crucifixions. One keeps finding the words “*proaikistheis anestaurothe-verberatos crucibus adfixit*,” or crucifying after scourging!² Jesus was tied to a post, while one or multiple soldiers used leather straps with bones or pieces of metal at the ends (*flagrum*) to attempt to remove every piece of flesh from His back. A soldier would lash the *flagrum* in an arc-like fashion across the naked back, legs, and arms. This scourging resulted in deep lacerations, profuse bleeding, and severe pain. Called the “half-death,” the idea was to bring the person to be crucified “one stroke away from death.”

The number of lashes in Mosaic law was set at 40 (cf. Deut. 25:3), but later reduced to 39 in order to prevent excessive blows by a counting error. “Many people conceive of scourging as a mere beating with a whip. In a sense this is true. But it is, however, like comparing an electric shock to a lightning bolt.”³ Remembering the sensory effects of the bloody sweat on the skin, the pain of the scourging increased to unfathomable levels. The scourging could be used as a form of execution, but Jesus was not to die yet, as the real punishment was still to come.

And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and plaiting a crown of thorns they put it on him. And they began to salute him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” And they struck his head with a reed, and spat upon him (Mk. 15:17-19).

The soldiers covered Jesus’ bloody skin with a purple “royal”

robe, and they continued to mock Him with the creation, placement, and later striking of the crown of thorns. The scalp is largely vascular, and therefore a blow to it can cause substantial blood loss. In addition, the scalp is covered with nerves. To illustrate this, try to find a spot on your scalp that is pain free to a pinprick. You probably can’t.

Jesus’ crown of thorns was not like the usual royal crowns of the time. The pileus was a sort of semi-oval headdress made of felt, which enveloped the head. Unlike the traditional crown depicted by an open ring, the actual crown of thorns may have covered His entire scalp. The blows from the reed across Jesus’ face or against the thorns would directly irritate the nerves along the face and scalp, bringing on severe pains resembling a hot poker or electric shock. These pains would stop almost abruptly, only to recur again with the slightest movement of the jaws or even a wisp of wind.

Then he handed Him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called the place of the skull, which is called in Hebrew Golgotha (Jn. 19:16-17).

Jesus had to carry His own Cross through the Via Dolorosa or the “Way of Suffering” to be crucified at Golgotha. In historical documents on crucifixion one finds the words *portare*, *bajulare*, *bastazein*, meaning “to carry,” but never *trahere*, *surein*, or “to drag.” Artists have commonly portrayed Jesus on Calvary dragging the entire Cross, but most now believe that victims only carried the *patabulum*, or crossbeam. Weighing 50-125 pounds, the *patabulum* to which He would be soon nailed proved to be too much for Jesus—He was already in a state of traumatic

shock! Jesus fell at least three times according to tradition, but He probably fell even more times before Simon of Cyrene assisted Him with carrying the Cross. It was the *exactor mortis*’ responsibility to make sure that the *cruciaris* (Jesus) would get his just punishment of crucifixion and not die on the way. Throughout the “parade of shame,” one carried a sign detailing their names and crimes while spectators mocked the victim. When finally arriving at the designated site, the “crucifixion” truly begins.

Yea, dogs are round about me; a company of evildoers encircle me; they have pierced my hands and feet—I can count all my bones—they stare and gloat over me (Ps. 22:16-17).

But he [Thomas] said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will not believe (Jn. 20:25).

The soldiers cast lots for Jesus’ garments (cf. Mk. 15:24). After the dice were rolled, the winner removed his prize. Remember the bloody sweat, the scourging, and the scarlet robe. To grasp the horror of this, think of the pain associated with removing a small Band-Aid fixed to a scab. With Jesus, a “giant gauze pad” fixed to his body was suddenly ripped off. And this was before the nails were even placed!

Though ropes were occasionally used, nailing the hands and feet was the habitual method of fixing the body to the cross. Nails similar to a railroad spike were placed into the hands, wrists, or forearms to attach them to the *patabulum*. Next, the person and the crosspiece were lifted onto the stipes (vertical post) and the feet were fixed with one or two nails. Major nerves in the hands and feet became partially severed, continuously irritated, and caused excruciating pain. Each breath and any movement would move the nails against these nerves and the bloody back against the coarse wood. Added to this was the weight of the victim’s entire body resting on his feet and

continued on page 51...

continued from page 35...

hands. And yet, this pain is not what finally kills a person.

It is difficult but not impossible to breathe as one hangs on a cross. Though the most commonly held belief is that the inability to breathe was the cause of death, recent studies suggest it was shock, not asphyxia, that caused death. Even with pain and blood loss from the scourging, dehydration, and nailing, death by crucifixion was one that did not typically come quickly. History records that it was not unusual for crucified victims to survive for at least a day or two after, with some actually remaining alive for up to nine days on the cross. With Jesus, however, much to the amazement of Pilate (cf. Mk. 15:43-45), death came within a few hours. Whether the cause of death was shock, asphyxia, or one of

the other suggested medical theories, it must be weighed against the Word of God: "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again" (Jn. 10:17-18).

Richard Anderson accurately comments: "A review of ancient crucifixion is more than the study of history or archeology. It is also a study in gratitude for anyone who catches even a physical glimpse of what the Lord has done for men."

1 M. Hengel, *Crucifixion*, Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1997, from the introduction.

2 P. Barbet, *A Doctor at Calvary*, Roman Catholic Books: Fort Collins, CO, 1953, 47.

3 F. Zugibe, *The Cross and the Shroud: A Medical Inquiry Into the Crucifixion*, Paragon House: New York, 1988, 13. ■

continued from page 49...

love for the Lord Jesus, in whose name Francis wore himself down until there was nothing left of him.

The truth of this wonderful man is inscribed in a letter he wrote to dear friends in Europe. He wrote knowing that he would not see them again in this life. And yet, his words sing with hope, expectation, joy, and love:

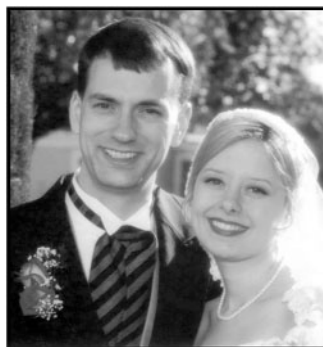
For my own great comfort, and that I may have you constantly in mind, I have cut from your letters to me your names written in your own hand, and these I carry always about with me . . . to be my solace and refreshment.

Francis is out of place on a pedestal elevated for veneration. By his own wish and the eloquent example of his unselfish life, he is at one's side—in all the challenges and sorrows, the joys and betrayals, the confidence and uncertainties of the long days, the long months, the long years through which one strives to love like a saint. ■

Robert Ostermann writes from Tempe, AZ.

Single, committed, practicing Catholics **There's reason for hope!**

56 marriages & 24 engagements



Mark Seech, 28 in CA & Sarah Lesniak 24, in CA
Married on: December 30, 2000

Their Words: "We are so very happy
and know that God brought us
together, with your help."

Ave Maria
Single Catholics ONLINE



AveMariaSCOL.com

***I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree ...***

Joyce Kilmer

Many know these famous lines but not much about Kilmer

"His was the happy case of a writer who was greater than any, or all, of his works."

This is especially true of his Catholic poems and essays. Kilmer was right: "A Catholic is not only a Catholic when he prays; he is a Catholic in all the thoughts and actions of his life. And when a Catholic attempts to reflect in words some of the Beauty of which as a poet he is conscious, he cannot be far from prayer and adoration."

Joyce Kilmer, A Literary Biography, provides a detailed portrait of the poet in and beyond his works. Abundant quotes from Kilmer's correspondence and writings – as well as from his poetry – show Kilmer as a complete man: poet, editor, critic, lecturer, and husband, father, Catholic, patriot, and soldier.

This book should be in every Catholic home. If you would like to enjoy this book or give it to a friend, use the order form below. The cost for this hardbound, 250-page edition is only \$25 plus \$3.95 for S&H.

Give someone a great Christmas gift: this book!

Name _____

Street _____

City/State _____

Please make check payable to **Write-Fit Communications** and mail with this form to: **John Covell, P. O. Box 1334, Brunswick, GA 31521.**