

Foreword

The death of our Lord Jesus Christ has been the central topic of spiritual writing since the very time the event took place. The four Gospels recorded it in varying degrees of detail and perspective. Dozens of saints and scholars throughout history have added the insights of their time and culture to an understanding of the central event of Christian belief.

One of the early Jesuits who followed in the footsteps of the founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola, was Luis de la Palma. Born in Toledo in 1559, he died in Madrid in 1641. His *History of the Sacred Passion* (the original title) has been published continuously for four hundred years. It came to the attention of readers in English through the translation of Henry James Coleridge, S.J. (1822–1893), whose grandfather was brother to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the poet and philosopher. Henry Coleridge exited the Anglican Church in 1852, and headed toward Rome. He then returned to England, and joined the Jesuits in 1857. His own writings include “The Public Life of Our Lord” and translations of letters of St. Francis Xavier and St. Teresa, as well as Luis de la Palma’s long-popular work.

Besides the shorter title of this edition, the present rendition by Mary Gottschalk is based on a modernized Spanish abridgment of the author’s original for the sake of avoiding repetition and the placing of blame for our Lord’s death, and to focus on the more important Gospel passages on the Passion. The title has been shortened to avoid misleading English-speaking readers who would expect that a “history” would require the dates, times, and footnotes that a typical book of history demands.

Before director Mel Gibson brought the Passion to the screen in 2004, de la Palma’s words helped generations of readers to visualize step-by-step the sufferings and meaning of Jesus’ Passion, suffered two millennia ago. Those words moved the founder of Opus Dei, St. Josemaría Escrivá, to urge many souls to immerse themselves in the Passion by reading this book. “I have always advised people to read

books on our Lord's Passion," he explained. "Such works, full of true piety, bring to our minds the Son of God, a Man like ourselves and also true God, who in his flesh loves and suffers to redeem the world."

Introduction

THE PASSION AND DEATH with which our King and Savior Jesus Christ ended his life and preaching in the world is the most sublime and marvelous thing that has ever happened since creation. He lived, suffered, and died to redeem people from their sins and to give them grace and eternal salvation. No matter how one looks at it, whether focusing on the person who did the suffering or on the reason why he suffered, the mystery is so great that to the end of the world nothing equal to it can ever happen.

For greater clarity, I think it will be good first to explain briefly the motives for which the leaders of the Jews—the chief priests and the Pharisees—determined in council to inflict such a humiliating death on our Lord, who, even if they did not want to see the rest, was undeniably a great prophet and a great benefactor to his people.

So publicized and evident was the miracle of the raising of Lazarus, so bright was its light, that those leaders ended up totally blinded by it. Although “many believed,” others, moved by envy, went to Jerusalem to relate and to grumble about what had happened in Bethany (see Jn 11:46). That event was the reason “the chief priests and the Pharisees met in council” and decided to put an end to the doings of the Lord, arguing that if they did not do so, everyone would believe in him and the Romans would think that the people were rising up in rebellion against them and in reprisal they would destroy the Temple and the city (see Jn 11:48).

*After the raising
of Lazarus.*

Moved by this fear, or perhaps camouflaging their envy and hatred of Jesus with feigned concern for the public good, they found no other means to put a stop to those miracles than to put a stop to him; and thus they decided to put the Savior to death. Caiaphas, by reason of his office and dignity as high priest, was moved by the Holy Spirit to give voice to the resolution arrived at by the council: “It is expedient that one man die so that the whole nation not be annihilated” (Jn 11:50). “This recommendation,” John explains, “he did not give on his own behalf, but being high priest that year, he prophesied

that Christ our Lord needed to die for his people; and not for the Jewish people only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad." From that day it was already decided to kill him; and, as if he were a public enemy, they put out a general call for "all those who knew where he was to tell them, so that they could arrest him" (Jn 11:56) and carry out the sentence.

The wickedness of those so-called judges is quite obvious, because they first gave the sentence, and only afterward held the trial. They gave the death sentence in this council, with the accused not present, without taking his statement or allowing him any defense; and this they did solely out of envy of the Lord (for the miracles he was doing) and out of fear of losing their economic position, their political clout, and their religious authority.

Then, in the trial, although there were accusers and witnesses and he was asked about "his disciples and his teachings," it was all a sham, a farce; everything was contorted in such a way as to fit in with the sentence already determined. And so it often is with our own decisions: they spring from a warped intention, and then we try to adjust our reasoning to match up with it.

The Savior, meanwhile, upon learning of this sentence and of the kind of arrest order put out on him by the chief priests (the kind obliging any person to turn him in), "went into hiding, in an area near the desert, in a city called Ephraim, and there he stayed with his disciples" (Jn 11:54). He wanted to allow time for the day appointed by his eternal Father to arrive; and along with that he was also setting us an example. He was showing us that we should prepare ourselves for dying. During these days the Savior was thinking about his death, which was already so close at hand. His disciples were grieved, and he spoke to them of heaven and encouraged them to have faith.

The appointed day arrived, and the Lord left the desert and Ephraim for the Holy City, to suffer and die there (see Mt 20:17). And he walked with such haste and resolve that he stayed ahead of the disciples—to their amazement, because they themselves were afraid (see Mk 10:32).