

Franciscan University Presents
“The Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus”
With guest, Dr. Michel Therrien

Finding Christ in Pope's "Jesus Of Nazareth"
By Kevin M. Clarke

SAN MARCOS, CA- Those who find themselves before the Holy Father's new book will find much more than another book on Jesus; they will find Jesus himself.

How is that so? The Holy Father has combined a faith hermeneutic with a historical hermeneutic; in other words, through a faith interpretation of mysteries actualized in history, Benedict XVI has found the historical Jesus, and in doing so has given the definitive model for all future searches.

There is something remarkably new about "Jesus of Nazareth Part II: Holy Week -- From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection." Benedict XVI has gathered much of the "essential fruits" of historical-critical scholarship and delivered it in the interpretation of the faith. In his pastoral excellence he has written this book in language for the whole flock, and so the novice as well as the scholar will glean much through a reflective reading of this text.

Though the Holy Father is often cast as inaccessible by some members of the media -- and those who regularly follow the Pope know the contrary to be true -- "Jesus of Nazareth, Part II" is open access to anyone who read this text in the light of faith.

The text follows a chronological order from Christ's triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, through the Last Supper, the agony, the trial and crucifixion, through his Resurrection, ending with an epilogue focusing upon the mystery of the Ascension and the Second Coming (and even a "middle coming").

Ignatius Press has produced a remarkably useful text -- complete with bibliographic sources for further study, an excellent glossary with in-depth explanations of key terms and figures, and 32 pages of indexing (10 of Scripture verses, 22 of authors and subjects). It seems apparent from the manner of the Pope's writing throughout that he intended this manuscript to be read with another text open -- the sacred Scriptures.

For The Church

Like any masterful writer, Benedict XVI has considered his audience well. And it is clear that the Pope has produced a multipurpose volume. To whom has he written?

Part II is for the exegete -- in fact, he mentions three by name in the opening paragraph of the foreword. These exegetes had deemed the coming of Part II "an important contribution that should be brought to fruition." The Pope has drawn from the most influential Biblical scholarship of recent eras in order to refute, modify, qualify, highlight, and elevate that which others have written.

Perhaps some of the strongest words may be found in the foreword: "One thing is clear to me: in 200 years of exegetical work, historical-critical exegesis has already yielded its essential fruit" (xiv). Benedict XVI proposes a solution that would keep

theology from slipping into irrelevance: The combination of a faith hermeneutic with a historical hermeneutic, a step that the Holy Father has taken in his book (xv). Many exegetes will follow in his footsteps.

Part II is also for interreligious conversation. This carefully written text will advance dialogue with Jewish leaders throughout the world. The action of Jesus in union with the Jewish feasts is a constant theme throughout the text. Benedict XVI also cites the work of numerous Protestant theologians. Many discussions in ecumenical circles will follow this book.

Clearly, Part II has been penned for the shepherds and for the flock. The Pope's words are spiritually enriching and bring the reader into a deeper encounter of the Lord of all history. This text stands as a permanent gift to the Church; for long after we all have been laid in our own tombs, priests will be writing homilies based upon this text.

And because this book is for the Church, "Jesus of Nazareth" is for all, because Jesus of Nazareth exists for all.

What follows will be a sampling of three sections I found to be spiritually powerful and enriching -- the mystery of the two wills of Christ, the resurrection of the Lord, and the ascension into heaven.

From Sin to Synergy

The question of the wills is one of the least-understood truths of Christology, even among catechists. So what is the relation between Jesus' will and that of the Father? Upon this topic, Benedict XVI launched into one of the theologically richest sections of the book, culminating with the last great Christological controversy.

St. Maximus the Confessor answered the question of the wills of Christ in the seventh century: Christ has a divine will and a human will -- not one, but two wills. Does this make Christ a schizophrenic subject? Not in the thought of St. Maximus, because in the agony of Gethsemane the human will and the divine will are restored once again to synergy -- working together. Wills that were brought into opposition through original sin are transformed from resistance to unity (157 ff).

So does the Father hear the prayer of Jesus? The author of Hebrews would seem to think so: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear" (5:7). Adolf von Harnack and Rudolf Bultmann argued that the word "not" must have been left out, because Christ died. But the Pope pointed out that transforming a text into its opposite is not really exegesis.

Benedict XVI offers an interpretation more immersed in the mystery of Christ's whole life. The answering of the prayer comes through the deliverance from death in resurrection not only of Christ, but of all believers (165). Christ lives in a state of "being-for" others, the Pope says, in other words, pro-existence. This thought is also related to Christ's self-gift in the Eucharist: "If we are able to grasp this, then we have truly come close to the mystery of Jesus, and we have understood what discipleship is" (134).

A Historical Moment

Scholars discuss many proofs for the resurrection: the testimony of the women (if made up, why not attribute testimony to men?), the transformation of the Apostles, the

rapid spread of the faith. But for Benedict XVI, one "proof" stands apart: The transfer of worship from the Sabbath to the Lord's Day -- the first day of the week, Sunday.

"For me," he writes, "the celebration of the Lord's day, which was a characteristic part of the Christian community from the outset, is one of the most convincing proofs that something extraordinary happened that day -- the discovery of the empty tomb and the encounter with the risen Lord" (259).

One of the most interesting points in the Pope's reflections he points to the beginning of the book of Acts, showing how over the 40 days after the resurrection that Jesus had been "eating salt with them" -- a scriptural sign indicating the establishment of a covenant (271).

The Pope draws three key conclusions about the encounters with the risen Lord, based on the experience and witness of the disciples: 1) Jesus did not rise in his mortal body the way Lazarus did; 2) Jesus is not a "ghost" appearing to the living while remaining among the dead the way Samuel did; and 3) the encounters are very different from mystical experiences in which the state of human consciousness is altered (273).

Similarly, the Resurrection is in itself a historical moment, but it is also a transcendent one that breaks history open and inaugurates in the eschatological age. "Jesus' Resurrection points beyond history but has left a footprint within history. Therefore it can be attested by witnesses as an event of an entirely new kind." (275).

The risen body of Jesus is at once physical and transcendent. On the one hand the evangelists go to great lengths to demonstrate the physicality of Jesus, but on the other, they only recognize Jesus in the light of faith. Thus, the Pope concludes that there is something truly new and transcendent about the risen Lord.

God's Dominion

Perhaps the most beautifully crafted and convicting words in the text present themselves in the epilogue, so do not stop reading after the account of the Resurrection.

The Pope's words on the mystery of the Ascension of Christ answer many questions that Catholics have about Jesus: Why were the disciples not sad at his departure? Where did he go? Was he still with them somehow? At the same time, the Pope addresses the skeptics' questions as well: Where in outer space is Jesus now? On what planet how many light years away? Part II has the answers.

Christ's ascension into heaven seems to present a problem -- Jesus is raised from the dead, but now he goes away. What is everyone so happy about? The Pope, however, shows that in the act of ascending, Jesus remains profoundly close and even truly present among believers. Here are some key points in this section.

Jesus' ascension does not lead him to some faraway galaxy light years away. In the exaltation of Christ, Jesus remains close to believers as he is seated at the right hand of the Father. Well, where is that seat? "It does not refer to some distant cosmic space, where God has, as it were, set up his throne and given Jesus a place beside the throne. God is not in one space alongside other spaces. God is God -- he is the premise and the ground of all the space there is, but he himself is not part of it. God stands in relation to all spaces as Lord and Creator. His presence is not spatial, but divine. 'Sitting at God's right hand' means participating in this divine dominion over space" (282-283).

In the Ascension, because of his entrance into God's dominion over space itself, Jesus' going away is also a coming, as he had prophesied in the farewell discourse in John

(cf. 14:28). If we wish to touch him, as Mary Magdalene did, we ourselves must ascend, the Pope says. But Christians must remember that Jesus is gloried upon his throne when he ascends upon the Cross. When we go up on high to touch him, "this path is not a matter of space travel of a cosmic-geographical nature: it is the 'space travel' of the heart" (286).

Finally, in his eschatological teachings, the Pope refers to not two, but three different "comings" -- the coming of Jesus through Mary, the Second Coming, and a "middle coming" ('adventus medius'). The middle coming is based upon St. Bernard's interpretation of John 14:23. Jesus states, "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." This coming of the Father and the Son is the basis for St. Bernard's understanding of the "adventus medius," which gives meaning to the time between the two comings of Christ.

Wait. Did he say "'space travel' of the heart"? Yes. That's perhaps as unforgettable as "Jesus was not Spartacus" in "Spe Salvi." Whoever is accusing Benedict XVI of being inaccessible clearly is not reading.

While previous quests for the historical Jesus had fallen short, in a truly unprecedented way Benedict XVI has brought the true Jesus of history -- who transcends history and who has left his footprint in it -- to readers everywhere. This Christ's vicar has seen to it that those who seek in this age will certainly find.

Clarke is an adjunct professor at John Paul the Great Catholic University in San Diego, California, where he teaches New Testament Greek in the Biblical Theology program. He is the author of a chapter on Benedict XVI's Mariology in "De Maria Numquam Satis: The Significance of the Catholic Doctrines on the Blessed Virgin Mary for All People" (University Press of America, 2009). He also teaches theology at JSerra Catholic High School in San Juan Capistrano, California. He and his wife, Natasha, are the parents of two daughters.

Titles Mentioned on *Franciscan University Presents*

**“The Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus”
with guest, Dr. Michel Therrien**

***Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance Into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* by Pope Benedict XVI. Ignatius Press.**

***The Suffering of Love: Christ’s Descent Into the Hell of Human Hopelessness* by Dr. Regis Martin. Ignatius Press.**

***The Truth About Trouble* by Father Michael Scanlan, TOR. St. Anthony Messenger Press.**

***Signs of Life: 40 Catholic Customs and Their Biblical Roots* by Dr. Scott Hahn. Doubleday Publishing.**

***Let the Fire Fall* by Father Michael Scanlan, TOR. Franciscan University Press.**

All of the above books are available through the Franciscan University Bookstore, 1235 University Blvd., Steubenville, OH 43952, 1-888-333-0381, www.franciscan.edu/bookstore.