



## Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion, 1988

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**Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs**

National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1988

### Preliminary Considerations

On June 24, 1985, the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews issued [\*Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis of the Roman Catholic Church\*](#). That document, like its predecessor, [\*Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration "Nostra Aetate" \(n. 4\)\*](#) (December 1, 1974), drew its inspiration from the Second Vatican Council and was intended to be an offering on the part of the Holy See to Catholics on how the Conciliar mandate can properly be fulfilled "in our time."

The present document, in its turn, seeks to specify the catechetical principles established in the Notes with reference to depictions and presentations of the events surrounding the passion and death of Jesus, including but not limited to dramatic, staged presentations of Jesus' death most popularly known as "passion plays." The principles here invoked are applicable as the *Guidelines* suggest (ch. III) to "all levels of Christian instruction and education," whether written (textbooks, teachers manuals, etc.) or oral (preaching, the mass media).

Specifically, the present document aims to provide practical applications regarding such presentations as they flow from the more general principles of the Guidelines and of sections III and IV of the *Notes* concerning the "Jewish Roots of Christianity" and the portrayal of "Jews in the New Testament." These principles (sec. A, below) lead to both negative and positive criteria (sec. B) for the evaluation of the many ways in which the Christian community throughout the world seeks, with commendable and pious intent, to remind itself of the universal significance and eternal spiritual challenge of the Savior's death and resurrection. A final section (C) acknowledges the many difficulties facing those attempting to dramatize the gospel narratives. It is hoped that this section will be helpful in providing perspectives on the many complex questions that can arise.

It has been noted by scholars that dramatizations of the passion were among the very last of the forms of "miracle" or "morality" plays to be developed in the Middle Ages. This hesitancy on the

part of our ancestors in the faith can today only be regarded as most seemly, for the Church's primary reflection on the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection takes place during Holy Week, as the high point of the liturgical cycle, and touches upon the most sacred and central mysteries of the faith.

It is all the more important, then, that extra liturgical depictions of the sacred mysteries conform to the highest possible standards of biblical interpretation and theological sensitivity. What is true of Catholic teaching in general is even more crucial with regard to depiction's of Jesus' passion. In the words of Pope John Paul II as cited at the beginning of the Notes: "We should aim, in this field, that Catholic teaching at its different levels . . . presents Jews and Judaism, not only in an honest and objective manner, free from prejudices and without any offenses, but also with full awareness of the heritage common [to Jews and Christians]."

## A. The Mystery of the Passion

1. The overall aim of any depiction of the passion should be the unambiguous presentation of the doctrinal understanding of the event in the light of faith, that is, of the Church's traditional interpretation of the meaning of Christ's death for all humanity. [Nostra Aetate](#) states this central gospel truth quite clearly: "Christ in his boundless love freely underwent his passion and death because of the sins of all, so that all might attain salvation" (cf. Notes IV, 30).

Therefore, any presentations that explicitly or implicitly seek to shift responsibility from human sin onto this or that historical group, such as the Jews, can only be said to obscure a core gospel truth. It has rightly been said that "correctly viewed, the disappearance of the charge of collective guilt of Jews pertains as much to the purity of the Catholic faith as it does to the defense of Judaism" ([Statement of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops](#), November 20, 1975).

2. The question of theological responsibility for Jesus' death is a long settled one. From the theological perspective, the *Catechism of the Council of Trent* (cited in the Notes IV, 30) articulated without hesitancy what should be the major dramatic or moral focus of any dramatization of the event for Christians – a profound self-examination of our own guilt, through sin, for Jesus' death:

In this guilt are involved all those who fall frequently into sin; for, as our sins consigned Christ the Lord to the death of the cross, most certainly those who wallow in sin and iniquity crucify to themselves again the Son of God. . . . This guilt seems more enormous in us than in the Jews since, if they had known it, they would never have crucified the Lord of glory; while we, on the contrary, professing to know him, yet denying him by our actions, seem in some sort to lay violent hands on him (*Catechism of the Council of Trent*).

3. The central creeds of the Church focus precisely on this theological message, without reference to the extremely complex historical question of reconstructing what various individuals might have done or not done. Only Pilate is mentioned, as the person with sole legal responsibility for the case: "He was also crucified for us, suffered under Pontius Pilate and was buried" (*Nicene Creed*). This fact gives a certain hermeneutic guidance for the use of various materials from the gospel passion narratives in a dramatic context (cf. sec. C, below).

4. In the development and evaluation of passion performances, then, the central criterion for judgment must be what the *Guidelines* called "an overriding preoccupation to bring out explicitly the meaning of the [gospel] text while taking scriptural studies into account" (II, emphasis added). Anything less than this "overriding preoccupation" to avoid caricaturing the Jewish people, which history has all too frequently shown us, will result almost inevitably in a violation of the basic hermeneutic principle of the Council in this regard: "the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God as if this followed from Sacred Scripture" (*Nostra Aetate*).

5. The 1985 *Notes* also provide a model for the positive understanding of the relationship between the Church and the Jewish people that should form a key element of the vision underlying presentations of the passion. As the *Notes* state: "The question is not merely to uproot from among the faithful the remains of anti-Semitism still to be found here and there, but much rather to arouse in them, through educational work, an exact knowledge of the wholly unique "bond" (*Nostra Aetate*, 4) which joins us as a Church to the Jews and to Judaism" (I, 8; cf. II, 10-11).

## B. Avoiding Caricatures and False Oppositions

1. Any depiction of the death of Jesus will, to a greater or lesser extent, mix theological perspectives with historical reconstruction's of the event based with greater or lesser fidelity on the four gospel accounts and what is known from extra biblical records.

The nature of such mixtures leaves the widest possible latitude for artistic creativity and insight, but also for abuses and prejudices. What the *Notes* state in their conclusion regarding Christian-Jewish relations generally is equally, and perhaps especially, true of the history of the development of passion plays in their various forms: "There is evident, in particular, a painful ignorance of the history and traditions of Judaism, of which only negative aspects and often caricature seem to form part of the stock ideas of many Christians."

2. Judaism in the first century, especially, incorporated an extraordinarily rich and diverse set of groups and movements. Some sought a certain accommodation with Hellenic/Roman culture in the Diaspora and in the Land of Israel. Others vigorously opposed any cultural compromise, fearing ultimate religious assimilation. Some argued for armed rebellion against Rome (Zealots), others for peaceful but firm resistance to cultural oppression (some Pharisees) and a few, such as the Temple priesthood and its party (Sadducees) acted in the eyes of the people as collaborators with Rome.

Emotions and hopes (both practical and spiritual) ran high, and rhetoric often higher. Thus, along the lines of great issues of the day, and reacting to the pressure of Roman occupation, there moved a variety of groups, each with its own wide range of internal diversity: Sadducees, Zealots, apocalypticists, Pharisees (of varying dispositions, especially the two major schools of Hillel and Shammai), Herodians, Hellenists, scribes, sages, and miracle workers of all sorts. Scripture was understood variously: literally, mystically, allegorically, and through mediating principles of interpretation.

Jesus and his teachings can only be understood within this fluctuating mixture of Jewish trends and movements. In point of fact, various groups and leaders of Jesus' time (perhaps especially certain Pharisees) would have espoused many of Jesus' ideas, such as the nearness of the kingdom of God, resurrection of the body, opposition to the policies of the Temple, and so forth. The gospels reflect only some of this diversity. Succeeding generations of Christians, perhaps misconstruing the theological thrust of St. John's use of the term *Ioudaioi* ("the Jews" or "Judeans"), tended to flatten it into a monolithic, usually negative stereotype. Thus, caricature came to form the basis of the pejorative "stock ideas" rejected so forcefully by the *Notes*. Presentations of the passion, on the contrary, should strive to present the diversity of Jewish communities in Jesus' time, enabling viewers to understand that many of Jesus' major concerns (e.g., critique of Temple policies) would have been shared by other Jews of his time.

3. Many of these negative "stock ideas," unfortunately, can become vividly alive in passion dramatizations. It is all too easy in dramatic presentations to resort to artificial oppositions in order to heighten interest or provide sharp contrasts between the characters. Some of these erroneous oppositions, which are to be carefully avoided, are the following:

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**a)** Jesus must not be depicted as opposed to the Law (Torah). In fact, as the *Notes* describe in greater detail, "there is no doubt that he wished to submit himself to the law (Gal 4:4) . . . extolled respect for it (Mt 5:17-20), and invited obedience to it (Mt 8:4) (cf. *Notes* III, 21, 22). Jesus should be portrayed clearly as a pious, observant Jew of his time (*Notes* III, 20 and 28).

**b)** The Old Testament and the Jewish tradition founded on it must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear, and legalism with no appeal to the love of God and neighbor (Dt 6:5; Lv 19:18; Mt 22:34-40; cf. *Guidelines* III).

**c)** Jesus and the disciples must not be set dramatically in opposition to his people, the Jews. This is to misread, for example, the technical terminology employed by John's gospel (*Guidelines* II). It also ignores those parts of the gospel that show the Jewish populace well disposed toward Jesus. In his life and teaching, "Jesus was and always remained a Jew" (*Notes* III, 20), as, indeed, did the apostles (*Notes* III, 22).

**d)** Jews should not be portrayed as avaricious (e.g., in Temple money-changer scenes); blood thirsty (e.g., in certain depiction"s of Jesus" appearances before the Temple priesthood or before Pilate); or implacable enemies of Christ (e.g., by changing the small "crowd" at the governor"s palace into a teeming mob). Such depiction"s, with their obvious "collective guilt" implications, eliminate those parts of the gospels that show that the secrecy surrounding Jesus" "trial" was motivated by the large following he had in Jerusalem and that the Jewish populace, far from wishing his death, would have opposed it had they known and, in fact, mourned his death by Roman execution (cf. Lk 23:27).

**e)** Any crowd or questioning scene, therefore, should reflect the fact that some in the crowd and among the Jewish leaders (e.g., Nicodemus, Joseph) supported Jesus and that the rest were manipulated by his opponents, as is made clear in the gospels (cf. *Nostra Aetate*, n. 4, "Jewish authorities"; *Notes* IV, 30).

**f)** Jesus and his teachings should not be portrayed as opposed to or by "the Pharisees" as a group (*Notes* III, 24). Jesus shared important Pharisaic doctrines (*Notes* III, 25) that set them apart from other Jewish groups of the time, such as the Sadducees. The Pharisees, in fact, are not mentioned in accounts of the passion except once in Luke, where Pharisees attempt to warn him of a plot against him by the followers of Herod (Lk 13:31). So, too, did a respected Pharisee, Gamaliel, speak out in a later time before the Sanhedrin to save the lives of the apostles (Acts 5). The Pharisees, therefore, should not be depicted as party to the proceedings against Jesus (*Notes* III, 24-27).

**g)** In sum, Judaism and Jewish society in the time of Christ and the apostles were complex realities, embracing many different trends, many spiritual, religious, social, and cultural values (*Guidelines* III). Presentations of the passion should strive to reflect this spiritual vitality, avoiding any implication that Jesus" death was a result of religious antagonism between a stereotyped "Judaism" and Christian doctrine. Many of the controversies (or "antitheses") between Jesus and his fellow Jews, as recorded in the gospels, we know today in fact reflect conflicts that took place long after the time of Christ between the early Christian communities and various Jewish communities (*Notes* IV, 29 A). To generalize from such specific and often later conflicts to an either/or opposition between Jesus and Judaism is to anachronize and, more basically, to vitiate the spirit and intent of the gospel texts (*Notes* III, 28; IV, 29 F).

**h)** In the light of the above criteria, it will also be useful to undertake a careful examination of the

staging and costuming aspects of particular productions where this may apply. To give just one example, it is possible to project subtly yet powerfully and or all of the above "oppositions" by costuming: arraying Jesus' enemies in dark, sinister costuming and makeup, with Jesus and his friends in lighter tones. This can be effective on the stage. But it can also be disastrous if the effect is to isolate Jesus and the apostles from "the Jews," as if all were not part of the same people. It is important to portray Jesus and his followers clearly as Jews among Jews, both in dress and in actions such as prayer.

i) Similarly, the use of religious symbols requires careful evaluation. Displays of the menorah, tablets of the law, and other Jewish symbols should appear throughout the play and be connected with Jesus and his friends no less than with the Temple or with those opposed to Jesus. The presence of Roman soldiers should likewise be shown on the stage throughout the play, to represent the oppressive and pervasive nature of the Roman occupation.

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## **C. Difficulties and Sensitivities in Historical Reconstruction Based on the Four Gospel Accounts.**

The mixture of theological, historical, and artistic aspects mentioned above (B 1) gives rise to many difficulties in constructing an adequate presentation of the passion narratives (Mt 26-28; Mk 14-15; Lk 22-23; Jn 18-19). Below are some examples of the difficult choices facing those who would seek to do so with faithfulness to the gospels. In each, an attempt will be made to apply to the question principles adduced in sections A and B, above, in the hope that such discussion will be of help to those charged with evaluations of the wide range of possible depictions existing today.

### **1. The Question of Selectivity**

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a) Those constructing a single narrative from the versions of the events in the four gospels are immediately aware that the texts differ in many details. To take just two examples, the famous phrase, "His Blood be upon us and on our children," exists only in the Matthean text (Mt 27:24-25), while the question of whether or not there was a full Sanhedrin trial is given widely differing interpretations in each of the gospel narratives. John, for example, has no Sanhedrin trial scene as such, but only a questioning before the two chief priests at dawn (18:19). Also in John, it is a Roman cohort, merely accompanied by Temple guards, that arrests Jesus (Jn 18:3, 12). How is one to choose between the differing versions?

b) First, it must be understood that the gospel authors did not intend to write "history" in our modern sense, but rather "sacred history" (i.e., offering "the honest truth about Jesus") (*Notes IV*, 29 A) in light of revelation. To attempt to utilize the four passion narratives literally by picking one passage from one gospel and the next from another gospel, and so forth, is to risk violating the integrity of the texts themselves, just as, for example, it violates the sense of Genesis 1 to reduce the magnificence of its vision of the Creation to a scientific theorem.

c) A clear and precise hermeneutic and a guiding artistic vision sensitive to historical fact and to the best biblical scholarship are obviously necessary. Just as obviously, it is not sufficient for the producers of passion dramatizations to respond to responsible criticism simply by appealing to the notion that "it's in the Bible." One must account for one's selections.

In the above instances, for example, one could take from John's gospel the phrase "the Jews" and mix it with Matthew 27:24-25, clearly implying a "blood guilt" on all Jews of all times in violation of *Nostra Aetate*'s dictum that "what happened in his passion cannot be blamed on all the Jews then living without distinction nor upon the Jews of today." Hence, if the Matthean phrase is to be used (not here recommended), great care would have to be taken throughout the presentation to ensure that such an interpretation does not prevail. Likewise, the historical and biblical questions surrounding the notion that there was a formal Sanhedrin trial argue for extreme caution and, perhaps, even abandoning the device. As a dramatic tool, it can too often lead to misunderstanding.

d) The greatest caution is advised in all cases where "it is a question of passages that seem to show the Jewish people as such in an unfavorable light" (*Guidelines* II). A general principle might, therefore, be suggested that if one cannot show beyond reasonable doubt that the particular gospel element selected or paraphrased will not be offensive or have the potential for negative influence on the audience for whom the presentation is intended, that element cannot, in good conscience, be used. This admittedly, will be a difficult principle to apply. Yet, given what has been said above, it would seem to be a necessary one.

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## 2. Historical Knowledge and Biblical Scholarship

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a) Often, what we have come to know from biblical scholarship or historical studies will place in doubt a more literalist reading of the biblical text. Here again, the hermeneutical principles of *Nostra Aetate*, the *Guidelines*, and the *Notes* should be of "overriding" concern. One such question suggests itself by way of example. This is the portrait of Pontius Pilate (cf. sec. A 3, above). It raises a very real problem of methodology in historical reconstruction of the events of Jesus' last days.

b) The Role of Pilate. Certain of the gospels, especially the two latest ones, Matthew and John, seem on the surface to portray Pilate as a vacillating administrator who himself found "no fault" with Jesus and sought, though in a weak way, to free him. Other data from the gospels and secular sources contemporary with the events portray Pilate as a ruthless tyrant. We know from these latter sources that Pilate ordered crucified hundreds of Jews without proper trial under Roman law, and that in the year 36 Pilate was recalled to Rome to give an account. Luke, similarly, mentions "the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices" in the Temple (Lk 13:1-4), thus corroborating the contemporary secular accounts of the unusual cruelty of Pilate's administration. John, as mentioned above, is at pains to show that Jesus' arrest and trial were essentially at Roman hands. Finally, the gospels agree that Jesus' "crime," in Roman eyes, was that of political sedition – crucifixion being the Roman form of punishment for such charges. The threat to Roman rule is implicit in the charge: "King of the Jews," nailed to the cross at Pilate's order (Mt 27:37; Mk 15:32; Lk 23:38; Jn 19:19). Matthew 27:38 and Mark 15:27 identify the "criminals" crucified with Jesus on that day as "insurgents." There is, then, room for more than one dramatic style of portraying the character of Pilate while still being faithful to the biblical record. Again, it is suggested here that the hermeneutical insight of *Nostra Aetate* and the use of the best available biblical scholarship cannot be ignored in the creative process and provide the most prudent and

secure criterion for contemporary dramatic reconstructions.

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## Conclusion

The *Notes* emphasize that because the Church and the Jewish people are "linked together at the very level of their identity," an accurate, sensitive, and positive appreciation of Jews and Judaism "should not occupy an occasional or marginal place in Christian teaching," but be considered "essential" to Christian proclamation (I, 2; cf. I,8).

This principle is nowhere more true than in depiction of the central events of the Paschal mystery. It is a principle that gives renewed urgency to the evaluation of all contemporary dramatizations of the passion and a renewed norm for undertaking that delicate and vital task.

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Source: [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#)