

# WHY DID JESUS DIE THE WAY HE DID?

by  
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The execution of Jesus of Nazareth by crucifixion is the most clearly established fact of his life. What can a reflective or even an historical-critical approach tell us about the death of Jesus? Why did Jesus die this way and not another?

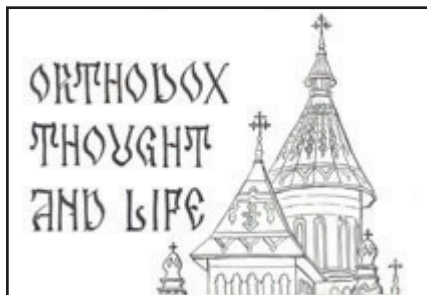
Crucifixion was a Roman form of torture so violent and cruel that Cicero said that no Roman citizen should even hear about it, much less see it. Crucifixion, in other words, was obscene – decent persons ought not be exposed to it. It was reserved for political rebels. As far as Rome was concerned, therefore, Jesus died as a political rebel, a fact attested to by his accusation: “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” However, the differences between Jesus’ person and teaching and that of the Zealots make any view of Jesus being such a rebel totally untenable. The other question is why he was condemned by the Sanhedrin. Here we know that it was under the accusation of being a false prophet. The two scenes of mockery support these views, for a parody of the crime was often used to mock the condemned. Therefore, as a political rebel, Jesus was mocked in the purple robe and crown of thorns; and as a false prophet, with a game of blind man’s bluff: “Prophecy to us, Christ!” (Mt 26:68).

Historically, there was a spectacular collusion of religious and political circumstances, intrigues, falsehoods, etc., that brought Jesus to death. This death had an immediate impact on Jesus’ teaching and, if we can use the term, on Jesus’ “movement.” This was because Jesus’ teaching – both his words and his actions – were so inseparable from His very own person, that His death was nothing other than a complete catastrophe for His disciples. Jesus was not a Socrates whose teachings could be separated from his person and passed down in a school of thought. Jesus preached the coming of the Kingdom of God. His disciples were asking to sit on His right and His left hand. His death was *the end* of all Messianic expectations, nothing short of a *total discrediting* of all He said and did. Therefore, Jesus died totally abandoned by His disciples. This means that Jesus’ death should have been the end of His movement.

How do the historical aspects of Jesus’ death fit into the Church’s theology? The Church saw Jesus’ death as a voluntary self-sacrifice, a saving act of God. However, this is in light of the Resurrection. Can anything further be said if we stay within the confines of the historical, crucified Jesus? That is, what can we say about the death of Jesus seen by

itself?

Of great help here are the reflections contained in a little book written in the fourth century by Saint Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. Though titled “On the Incarnation,” a large portion of the book is in fact about Christ’s death. Of interest here is Athanasius’ explanation of why Christ died the way He did. Athanasius sees the historical circumstances and details of Christ’s death as a witness of its providential character. He makes the following observations, which we will expand:



[1] His death **was public** – so that it could not be denied. In other words, Jesus did not die in private, or out in the wilderness, or at home, or in front of just Peter, James and John. He died in front of everyone – friend and foe alike. Moreover, His death was verified by the lance and testimony of a Roman Centurion, who risked his own life if Jesus was not dead. The Romans understood death;

the lance left a huge wound (some modern medical explanations of the blood and water tell us that when the centurion pierced Jesus, he ruptured His heart). That is why Thomas wanted to see *that* wound, because if Jesus had it, then without question He had been dead. Therefore, Jesus’ death was not denied by any of those present, and for this reason Pilate was asked that his tomb be guarded – specifically because He was dead.

[2] St Athanasius says that it was the **worst form of death** possible, so no one could accuse Him of cowardice. Jesus died by Roman torture, publicly, falsely accused, in disgrace, abandonment and degradation – in front of His own Mother; in short, in the fullness of human tragedy and horror.

[3] Jesus kept His body whole, **not a bone being broken**, as a paschal sacrifice (Ex 12:46, Jn 19:36). He did not die like Paul, being beheaded; nor like Stephen, by stoning (Acts 7:59); nor by being thrown over a cliff (Lk 4:29); nor by loss of blood from the flogging, as an article analyzing his death said he would have died, had he not been crucified.

[4] Athanasius points out that it was **not a natural death** – not from sickness or old age – for that would be a result of corruption, of which Christ had none, because He was sinless.

Here we may add a fifth point to Athanasius’ list:

[5] The most notable historical, factual element of Jesus’ death, is that He **died on a Cross – i.e. on wood, the “Tree”** as it is called in 1 Peter 2:24. In

*Cont. on page 8*

# IOCC ROMANIA FLOOD RESPONSE

Proposal Synopsis December 2010

## Description of Emergency and Need

During June-July 2010, continuous torrential rains swept Romania, swelling rivers, flooding homes, damaging roads and causing massive damage in 38 counties. Particularly hard hit was the northeastern, eastern, and southeastern part of Romania, where 23 people lost their lives; and thousands of villagers have fled their homes as flood waters from the overflowing rivers spread across the region. Almost 1,000 houses were destroyed and about 10,000 houses were flooded and damaged.

## National and international response

Government and state institutions have responded relatively well but were unable to meet all needs. Romania asked financial aid from the European Union's Solidarity Fund totalling 75 million euros (\$99.38 million). To date, no official announcement has been made by the Romanian Government that this money has been received. The Romanian Government (GOR) has allocated to every family whose house was destroyed by floods, 10,000 euros for constructing new houses. However, this money didn't cover entirely the costs for building a house, nor the construction labor costs. Several NGOs (both international and local ones) raised funds and collected food, clothing, construction materials etc. for flood victims.

## IOCC Response

In collaboration with Federation Philanthropy, a private non-profit association established in 2008, encompassing 15 of the largest and most representative Orthodox faith-based NGOs involved in social work in eleven different counties of Romania, and the Tulcea Diocese of the Romanian Orthodox Church, whose villages received much damage, but little assistance, International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) will assist the floods victims from the target area to successfully weather the harsh winter that has been forecast by purchasing wood burning stoves. Approximately eighty-five beneficiaries will be identified and assisted in the localities of Ceatalchioi, Patlageanca, Salceni, and Plaur from Tulcea County that were the worst hit villages. The beneficiaries will receive terracotta stoves that function with solid fuel (wood or coal) for heating and cooking.

The Federation Philanthropy will work with the local parish priests to produce lists of the neediest families who qualify under the selection guidelines. A final beneficiary list will then be made by the Social Counselor of the Diocese and approved by the Bishop.

Technical criteria for the stoves will be developed

and quotations of bids from at least three vendors will be sought. The vendor will be chosen based on the lowest bid (while fulfilling the criteria). The vendor will also be required to transport, install, and instruct the beneficiaries on appropriate and safe usage of the stoves.

It is anticipated that the project will take about five weeks from the start date and cost approximately \$28,800. IOCC Romania will monitor all aspects of the work through its local office and require proper reporting as agreed as well as make a field visit for visual inspection of the delivered and operating stoves.

*Through a diocesan-wide appeal, The Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America collected \$32,639.97 which was donated to IOCC for its flood relief efforts in Romania.*

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## Why Did Jesus Die ...

*Cont. from page 3*

other words, Christ the New Adam uses the same instrument to die as did the first Adam, a tree. Hence, St. Paul makes a comparison of the old Adam to the new or "second" Adam, Christ (I Cor 15:22, 45), specifically in a discussion of His death. Through wood, the New Adam creates a "new use" for death – as St. Maximus the Confessor likes to say – a life-giving use.

Thus, St. Athanasius says that God did not conquer death by imposition from outside of man. In other words, God did not simply make a decree, speaking from heaven, but He conquers it from the very place that death and corruption had taken root: in the human body. As Adam's sin was in the body, through a temptation towards pleasure and egotism (not through speaking blasphemies or using bad language, nor through a fist fight with Eve, etc.), these two things had to be undone in a human body. And so they were, when Christ died not in pleasure but in great pain, renouncing all egotism through a death not from disobedience, but in obedience to God (Phil. 2:8). Furthermore, as crucified, Christ dies **as a criminal**, becoming "a curse" for us (Gal 3:13). He accepts it all, innocently, that He might free us from it all (Heb 4:15, 9:26-8), obviously being identified as the "man of sorrows" who is "bruised for our transgressions" (Is. 53).

Here is our main point: if we stay within the bounds of the *historical, factual circumstances* of Christ's death, accepted and verified by critical scholarship, we need not think – as do some scholars (but by no means the majority) – that the crucifixion was no more than incidental, or a misunderstanding, etc. Rather, the very circumstances provide all the providential *signs* without which Christ's death could be questioned or misinterpreted, leading to a great ambiguity of meaning. Precisely these circumstances provide the basis of the theological framework later established in

*Cont. on page 13*

# GEORGE DOBREA CALLED TO THE LORD

One of the last Romanian Americans of the “great generation,” George Dobrea (1926-2010), left us for a better world. He was born April 22, 1926 in Gary, Indiana, as the only son to a family of Romanian immigrants, Petre and Maria Dobre from Sambata de Sus, Romania. During WW II, he fought in the US Navy to retake the Philippines and received high medals. He graduated from the University of Detroit, and then he moved to Cleveland to become Vice President of Saunders, Stiver Investments. He worked for many years as VP of the Growth association for Governmental Affairs.

He married Jean Barson, a dedicated member of St. Mary’s Romanian Orthodox Church in Cleveland. Their life was filled by gracious children who are now accomplished and with children of their own: Peter (Beverly), George Michael (Diane), Paul of Lyndhurst and Mary (Eric) Grindahl of Milan, OH. George and Jean were blessed to have three grandchildren.

The worlds of sports, finance, culture and politics were his domains. Thus, he became involved in various enterprises: environmental greenhouses, Winter Funlands refrigerated tobogganing (Strongsville). Then he became the president of the Union and League of RSA. From 1956-1966, he served as Parish Council President of St. Mary’s during the years of the construction of the current church building, under the pastorate of Father Vasile Hategan. Thus he rose to become one of the famous Romanian Americans in Cleveland and in the country. In 1963, he began to serve “with a good heart” on the Cuyahoga County Board of Education, whose President he became during the stormy years of desegregation. He attended many Congressional hearings and rubbed shoulders with mayors and governors, senators and Presidents. He was part of the first American born generation of Romanians who became representative, along with other great co-nationals of his time.

In the Romanian Episcopate, he joined forces with Fr. Trutza and Fr. Vasile Hategan, Bishop Valerian, John Sibisan, Titz Stoica and many others standing for the freedom of the Episcopate during the Cold War. He worked hard for the building of the new church, and together with our parishioners helped Father Hategan to open the Romanian Museum (1960). He turned down the offer to be in the Nixon Government team and that of Governor John Gilligan. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, he stood for the extension of NATO through visits to the White House and other actions. He became Honorary Consul for Romania and received the visit of Romania’s President Iliescu.

He became involved in adoptions from Romania. He was known in inter-Orthodox relations and became recognized as a key personality of our life in Cleveland. In the last ten years, as chair of the Romanian Museum, he was instrumental in organizing exhibitions at: Notre Dame College and Beck Art Center. He donated his glass icons to the church.

George Dobrea was an activist, a visionary man and everybody’s friend. He was generous and helpful, compassionate and faithful. He cared for the sick members of the church and offered help to students, like a “a priest without a collar.” During the last years, he struggled with cancer, but he was brave. He accepted his end, and he was prepared for it as for his greatest passage. His funeral was a true celebration and recognition of his life. It was attended by hundreds, including Congress representatives, mayors, senators, judges, businessmen and all former Council Presidents of the church. The Mayor of Cleveland and the Cleveland Plain Dealer both recognized his personality. The service was conducted by V. Rev. Frs. Remus Grama, Laurence Lazar (Southfield, MI) and Romey Rosco (Dearborn Hts., MI) while the responses were given by Deacon Nick Neagoe, and the cantors: Ionel Satnoinau, John Lazar and Tom Rosco. The family asked that contributions be sent to either St. Mary Cathedral or the Romanian Ethnic Art Museum. May God establish his soul with the righteous and grant him the eternal reward! Rest in peace, dear friend!

**Fr. Remus Grama**

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## Why Did Jesus Die ... *Cont. from page 8*

light of the Resurrection; and without them, this framework *simply would not work*. The way Jesus died – publicly, criminally, pierced, and on wood – allowed the New Testament writers and early Church Fathers to see Christ clearly as the Paschal Lamb (pierced, with no bones broken) and as the New Adam (who redeems the old Adam through the same instrument used in the fall, a tree). If Christ had died privately, some could question whether or not He really died at all. Had He died by stoning, He could not be seen as the paschal Lamb of God. Had he not died on wood, He could not be seen as the New Adam. As the Resurrection does explicitly, the historical circumstances of Christ’s death implicitly leave no doubt as to Who it was who died for our salvation.

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## The Spiritual Life ... *Cont. from page 4*

cannot give up training before the goal is met. We must stay the course, listen to our coaches, be dedicated to training, and overcome all injuries and hurdles. Only at the very end can one repeat the words of Saint Paul:

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (2 Tim. 4:7).*