

## THE APPALLING AGONY OF THE CRUCIFIXION OF JESUS

From a medical perspective by Dr Owen Gallagher

### INTRODUCTION.

The Crucifixion was filled with intense suffering and intense and infinite love. The more you love someone the more you are prepared to suffer for them, and Jesus in His Crucifixion underwent the cruellest sufferings ever to show His infinite love for us.

Crucifixion was first used in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC in Mesopotamia, which is present day Iraq combined with small areas of Turkey and Syria. Alexander the Great brought it to the Eastern Mediterranean in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC where the Romans refined it into the most brutal death system ever devised. It was eventually abolished in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD by King Constantine the Great who became the first emperor to convert to Christianity. He thought crucifixion was too cruel a method to put anyone to death.

Crucifixion could be done in many different ways and the Romans perfected their techniques over several hundred years until they became experts at administering the most barbarous and painful form of death known to man; so by the time Jesus came to be crucified they had their cruel techniques down to a fine art.

Death by crucifixion could be short and brutal or slow but a little less painful and drawn out over several days. A scourging before crucifixion or nailing the person to the cross instead of tying them on, made the death much more painful but caused the person to die a lot sooner from blood loss and the shock caused by agonizing pain.

Romans rarely applied crucifixion to their own people as they considered it too brutal and it was a punishment reserved for disobedient slaves, deserting soldiers, Christians, foreigners who had committed serious crimes and very bad criminals. The famous Roman historian Tacitus described crucifixion as 'THE EXTREME PENALTY.'

Jesus's death on the Cross was by far the most brutal death of anyone in the history of the world and there are for many reasons for that which I will talk about at the start of each decade of the 5 Sorrowful Mysteries.

In preparing these meditations on the sufferings of Jesus at the Crucifixion I looked at a number of books written by medical doctors and others written by or about mystical saints, who had a special interest in the Crucifixion. These included:

1. A Doctor at Calvary by Dr Pierre Barbet (1949)
2. The Crucifixion of Jesus. A Forensic Inquiry. By Frederick T Zugibe (2005)
3. The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ by Anne Catherine Emmerich
4. St Bridget of Sweden
5. St Bernard of Clairvaux
6. Sister Mary Magdalen of the Sancta Clara Order, Rome
7. Pieta Prayerbook published by Divine Mercy Publications. HIGHLY recommended prayer book. Visit [wwwdivinemeracy.org](http://www.divinemeracy.org)
8. Devotion to the Holy Face of Jesus and [www.humanlife.ie](http://www.humanlife.ie)
9. The Golden Arrow [www.humanlife](http://www.humanlife)

Many of you will have seen the film produced by Mel Gibson called 'The Passion of The Christ' and it showed the most brutal depiction of Jesus's death ever filmed. It was a well-researched film with a shocking version of what Our Lord suffered in His Passion compared to other previous films on that subject, but despite its brutality it was not only a pale imitation of the Crucifixion in the physical sense of His Suffering, but it was completely unable to come close to capturing the mental and emotional anguish Jesus went through. In reality the death of Jesus was much worse and much more bloody and painful than any of us could ever imagine the Crucifixion to be.

Christ did die a most painful death to make reparation for our sins and every time we sin especially serious sin, we pile more pain and suffering onto the crucified Christ.

When Christ was dying on the Cross and despite his horrendous pain, He was thinking of you and me. We were on His mind. We have to ask ourselves though if we truly are thinking of Him while we have the chance here on earth and are we seriously trying to reduce His pain at Calvary by not sinning?

There were no artists or photographers at Calvary and the majority of the paintings done many years later are highly sanitised versions of the real Crucifixion. Jesus was basically tortured and beaten to death over a period of many hours. It was only due to repeated miracles, with Jesus willing and praying that He would live, so that He could suffer more to atone for our sins, that He survived so long. It is extraordinary that He lived so long, considering the severity of His injuries and the huge blood loss, to such an extent that in the end when he had a spear thrust through His Heart, blood AND water came out as he had almost completely exsanguinated by then.

Saints in their visions confirmed that Jesus should have died a lot sooner from for example, not only the blood loss, but the shocking pain and 3 of the thorns from the Crown of Thorns having pierced His Skull.

St Bridget for a long time wanted to know the number of blows Our Lord received during His Passion. He one day appeared to her and said 'I received 5480 blows on My Body. If you wish to honour them in some way, say 15 Our Fathers and 15 Hail Marys with the following prayers (which he taught her...see the Pieta prayerbook) for a whole year. When the year is up you will have honoured each one of My Wounds.'

Our Lord made 21 promises to those who recite the 15 St Bridget's prayers for a year including delivering 15 souls from your lineage from Purgatory and promising to be with you on your death bed, accompanied by His Beloved Mother, and receive your soul and lead it into eternal joy.

St Pope Paul VI heard a talk given to him about the Crucifixion by a doctor who studied the medical aspects of it with Dr Pierre Barbet (A Doctor at Calvary). He was shocked and tearful at the end and said 'Nobody has ever told us what Jesus actually went through for us before.'

#### The First of the 5 Sorrowful Mysteries - THE AGONY IN THE GARDEN.

The Agony in the Garden was the most despairing event ever to take place in the history of the world. We all at some time in our lives have known something about despair and have been unjustly treated and injustice is a bitter pill to swallow especially if we have no opportunity to defend ourselves.

How difficult and painful was it for Jesus as He entered the Garden of Gethsemane knowing full well what he had to go through that night and the next day? He knew that in His hour of need His 3 chosen apostles would fall asleep after He had pleaded with them to stay awake and pray for Him. They had seen the extreme anguish on his face, yet they soon forgot about Him when He went off to pray alone and fell asleep.

He knew Peter who He had chosen to be Pope from all of the apostles was going to deny Him 3 times, that Judas who he had befriended for 3 years and truly loved was going to betray Him. Anne Catherine Emmerich in her book about The Passion said that Judas betraying Him was one of the parts of the Passion that grieved Jesus the most. He was sold by someone he considered a friend for 30 pieces of silver, about 200 dollars, a derisory amount that was normally paid out for a slave and given by the Pharisees to Judas on purpose to show their contempt for Jesus and the betrayer, Judas.

Jesus knew all the apostles except John would run away and abandon Him (How often have we run away and abandoned Him?) He was going to be falsely accused by the Pharisees for doing so many things He had not done, face 6 different grossly unfair Court hearings, be spat upon, punched, sneered, and laughed at and all that even before His Crucifixion had begun....and all for us. He could see all our sins and knew he had to go through appalling suffering to redeem us as that is what His Father in heaven asked of Him. All He asks from each of us in turn is for us just to love Him. Is that so difficult? Every time we think of sinning, we should ask ourselves, do we really want to add to Christ's pain on the Cross?

The sight of all the hideous sins of mankind before His Eyes and the foreknowledge of what was to happen to Him caused an anxiety in Jesus that was extraordinarily profound, to such a level that 'His sweat was, as it were, great drops of blood falling down on the ground.'

Sweating of blood is an extremely rare medical condition called hemathidrosis and it only happens where a person is under intense physical, mental and emotional stress. It is such a serious condition that many of those who do sweat blood, die shortly afterwards. Those that survive are left feeling profoundly weak partly because of the significant blood loss but also due to the extreme emotional distress. The survivors have hyperaesthesia, a condition the exact opposite to anaesthesia where instead of everything being numbed, all of the body becomes extremely sensitive to touch.

After The Agony in the Garden, The Passion of Our Lord was only just beginning but Jesus was already in a terrible condition.

#### The Second Sorrowful Mystery – THE SCOURGING AT THE PILLAR.

Those of you who saw The Passion of The Christ will have been shocked, as I was at the time, by the scourging at the pillar and the brutality of the scourgers, the very idea of whipping any human being in such a barbaric way with such obvious relish and the sight of Jesus's blood splattered everywhere. It was like a scene from a horrific abattoir. But in reality, the real scourging was much worse than the film version.

Let us not forget that prior to his scourging Jesus had not slept for well over 24 hours, nor had he been given anything to eat or drink since The Last Supper. He had been let down in a profound way by all His good friends and apostles except for His Holy Mother, the Apostle John and a few holy women and was mocked and punched and spat on all night as he underwent spurious trials in the houses of Annas and Cephas, then Pontius Pilate and Herod. He was in an exhausted and weakened state by the time the scourging began.

In Roman times, scourging was usually reserved as a severe punishment for serious criminals and rebels against the Roman Empire and sometimes these men were scourged to death. It was known that men who were scourged usually died from blood loss after being whipped more than 40 times, so if the Romans wanted to reduce the chance of their prisoner dying, they gave 40 minus 1 scourge.

Jesus was given 39 scourges, initially with canes which sting the skin and make it swell and become soft, so that when the real scourging began with a whip similar to a cat o' nine tails the whip could rip the skin to shreds. The cat o' nine tails had 10 or 12 leather thongs attached to a handle and then sewn into the thongs were pieces of sharp metal, glass, nails and bone (especially the heel bone of a sheep). These items sewn in place lifted big lumps of flesh out of the unfortunate victim's back and many bled so heavily from the trauma they died during the scourging.

The men who were scourged were whipped from their neck to their lower calves. Jesus was tied naked to a pillar with his arms above his head. Investigators of the Shroud of Turin counted 600 scourge marks on Jesus's body.

During the making of the film *The Passion of The Christ*, Jim Caviezel the man who was acting Jesus, was accidentally hit with a cane on his back at the start of the filming as the covering to protect him had not been placed on his back properly. Caviezel said he could hardly breath after one strike and was left gasping for a long time. Filming had to be stopped until his wound was attended to and he recovered his breathing.

Scourging with such implements lifted lumps of skin and flesh off the body down as far as the rib cage. It is a miracle Our Lord survived such a savage beating considering the condition he was in at the start of it as He was already exhausted by the batterings He had in the houses of Cephas and Annas. Most people do not survive losing 40 percent of their blood and sometimes considerably less than that. It's called bleeding out. Again it is felt that Jesus prayed to live through the scourging as He wanted to fulfil the prophecies and redeem our sins.

It is well to remember that every time we commit serious sin we are deliberately putting Jesus through another scourging.

### The Third Sorrowful Mystery – THE CROWNING OF THORNS.

While Jesus was at the sham courts before he was scourged, he was faced with a barrage of people who were full of demonic and irrational hatred for Him and were baying for His death. He was punched all over his body, was beaten with sticks and had stones thrown at Him. The Shroud of Turin showed the cartilage septum of His nose was broken and that there were multiple bruises and cuts all over His Face and Body.

Pope Clement 11 (1730-1740) approved the visions of a nun in the convent of the Sancta Clara order, Sister Mary Magdalen who said Our Lord had appeared to her and told her that he had 15

other different tortures done to Him that were not reported in the Bible. These included having much of His Beard uprooted, a thorn pushed through His Tongue, burnt with hot embers and being made to stand on an extremely hot metal sheet in His Bare Feet. We all know how tender the soles of our feet are if we stand even barefooted on a small stone for a second.

What would it have been like for Jesus to walk on the burnt soles of His Feet all night and then the rocky torturous road to Calvary? It just doesn't bear thinking about. All our serious sins are like us carousing with the furious rabble in the houses of Cephas and Annas and walking up to Jesus and punching Him in the face and spitting at Him and saying 'That's what I think of You. Don't bother Yourself trying to save my soul. I'll sort myself out!'

The Crown of Thorns were taken from the densely spiny branches of a bush called Euphorbia Milii whose sap is poisonous to animals and intensely irritating to man. It was more like a cap than a crown and had about 120 very hard black thorns in it, each of them 3 cm long. (For reference a toothpick is just over 5 cm long). The Crown of Thorns was placed on His Head and then knocked into place with heavy blows from sticks. The scalp bleeds very heavily when it is pierced and the blood loss from that would have been huge and the pain unbearable. Some saints are of the opinion that three of the thorns pierced His Skull and that should have caused a rapid death but again Jesus prayed that he would live to suffer more to atone for our sins.

#### The Fourth Sorrowful Mystery – THE CARRYING OF THE CROSS.

After the mockery and the baiting at the Crowning of Thorns Jesus had the purple cloak torn of His Body as the Roman soldiers prepared Him to carry The Cross. We all know how painful it is to have a small bandage pulled off from a wound but to have an entire cloak that was stuck to so much dried blood ripped off without ceremony and accompanied by cruel laughs, must have been harrowing.

By now Jesus was exhausted and in agony all over His Body but he knew He had to finish what He was called to do and carry His Cross to calvary a distance of 650 yards.

The full Cross with the stipes (the upright) and the patibulum (the cross bar) weighted around 250 pounds (just under 21 stone, 130kg) The Romans made those about to die carry the patibulum which weighed about 140 pounds or 10 stone. This heavy crossbeam was roughly thrown onto Our Lord's Shoulder, and he was ordered to carry it while being punched and kicked.

Jesus had lost most of the flesh from His shoulders due to the scourging and before he had gone far carrying the patibulum, an even bigger wound had opened up in his shoulder that was 3 fingers deep and 10 cm long (4 inches) and it exposed 3 bones, the collar bone, the top of the humerus (the main upper bone of the arm) and the scapula (a large bone on each side over the upper shoulder).

Jesus appeared to St Bernard of Clairvaux and told him that the worst pain of the Passion was His Shoulder Wound. We can all try to ease the pain of The Passion by promoting devotion to The Shoulder Wound of Jesus and learning the Shoulder Wound prayer which is in the prayerbook Pieta.

Every time Jesus fell, due to His weakened condition and heavy burden, He went straight onto his bare knees onto hard ground where it was said some people had thrown out sharp stones to make his journey even more unbearable. He then fell flat on His Face as He had no way of stopping Himself

as He tried to control the crossbeam from falling on His scourged back. How did He respond to all this cruelty? He prayed for those who hurt Him!

Jesus meeting His Holy Mother on the road to Calvary was the saddest and most profoundly tragic moment in the history of the world. Our lady is so Holy that Fr Garrigou Lagrange, Theologian to St Pope John Paul 11 in describing her said 'The Dignity of Mary surpasses that of all the other saints combined.' Or as a poet one time described her;

Women above all women glorified,

Our tainted natures solitary boast.

There are no words that can describe the sorrow and grief when Our Lord met His Holy Mother. St Bernard of Clairvaux said Our Lady's anguish was so profound that if all her distress had been divided amongst all the men and women who ever lived...over 106 billion... their sadness would have been so severe that everyone of them would have died. Our sins put Christ through His terrible Passion and by doing so we are responsible too for His Holy Mother's suffering.

Veronica wanted desperately to see Jesus on His way to Calvary. Some believe she was the woman at the well who had 5 husbands. When she saw Him with His face covered in blood and barely recognisable, she immediately took off her veil and gave it to Him to wipe the blood of His Face. It was the only thing she could think of that might give Jesus some tiny relief. When she looked at the veil later, she was shocked to see the image of His Face on it.

That image on the scarf has been preserved and kept in Rome where it had the appearance of a very old, faded cloth with some smudge like marks on it. In January 1849 Blessed Pope Pius 1X had the veil put on display for public veneration. During this time, the Divine Face appeared distinctly, as if living, and was illuminated by a soft light. From that incident a holy layman in France Leo Dupont set up devotion to the Holy Face, a devotion that brings huge benefits all who follow it. For further information on this very important devotion go to [www.holyface.com](http://www.holyface.com) or [www.humanlife.ie](http://www.humanlife.ie)

Simon of Cyrene, who was a gardener, was going through Jerusalem with two of his three sons, Rufus and Alexander. He was a pagan from what is now Libya and had little interest in what was going on with this man Jesus on the streets, when he was ordered to help The Man carry His Cross. The only reason He was asked to help was because the Roman soldiers who were very experienced at judging if their victims were at their limits', thought Jesus wasn't going to make it to the top of Calvary and they were going to miss out on that.

Jerusalem was an outpost of the Roman Empire and there was little for the soldiers to do, so a crucifixion brought a little excitement into their dull lives, and they knew if Simon helped out however unwillingly, Jesus would make it to the top of Calvary and the Crucifixion could proceed.

Simon had barely lifted the Cross when he underwent a deep conversion as did his sons and they became Christians within a very short time.

The Fifth Sorrowful Mystery - THE CRUCIFIXION.

Jesus went through all this appalling and unbearable pain because He loves You. He wanted to atone for our sins as He wants us to be with Him forever in heaven. He is shouting to us at the top of His voice...I loved you so much I was prepared to die in agony for you...How many of us truly respond to that love?

Totally exhausted and praying forgiveness for all those who have persecuted Him, Jesus arrives at the top of The Hill of Calvary. All other men would have died long before after what He had been through but He forced Himself to live to suffer more so that He could redeem us. He knew He had to suffer 3 more hours of unendurable pain hanging on the Cross but voluntarily submitted Himself to it.

He was thrown roughly onto the Cross and His arms spread out to nail His Hands to the Cross. The Shroud of Turin showed that his right Shoulder was dislocated in the process and His left Shoulder was probably also dislocated as well. During the filming of The Passion of The Christ one of Jim Caviezel's shoulders was dislocated in filming the Crucifixion scene despite all the care taken and filming had to be delayed for a long time.

Roman soldiers were experts at crucifying and inflicting the maximum pain and some of them certainly seemed to enjoy doing it. After dislocating the shoulder of Jesus which can only be described as excruciating, they drove a 6-inch nail through the median nerve in the middle of His Wrists. That would have caused immediate exquisite pain in His Hands and paralysis of them as they went into a terrible spasm of pain.

The right foot of Jesus was placed on top of the left foot and a huge nail driven through both, causing unspeakable agony to the soles of His Feet in particular, as they are one of the most sensitive parts of the body.

The agony from the deeply excoriated flesh on His Back pressing against the hard wood of the Cross, the unbearable pains of His Hands and Feet, the sharp thorns were all dreadful but on top of that Jesus couldn't get a breath.

He was hanging by His Hands that were nailed to The Cross and if He pulled Himself up to expand His lungs it made the hand pain much worse and if He pushed Himself off His Feet to take the pressure of His Hands, that was sheer agony. There was no movement that could bring relief from these pains. All people who are in pain feel the need to take deep frequent breaths, but it was just impossible for Our Lord to do that.

The only way He could breathe and stay alive was to take very shallow and rapid breathes.

Try this yourself to get the slightest inkling of what Our Lord's breathing was like on the Cross. Take as deep a breath as you can and let out 10% of the air, only 10%. Now maintain your breathing on that 10% for half a minute and see how uncomfortable that is - and you are NOT in agonising pain!

We have all had cramps at one time or another and they are just about bearable. When Jesus was on the Cross, He was continually cramped in most of His Muscles from a huge build-up of lactic acid due to his immense physical exertions and from a retention of carbon dioxide as He couldn't breathe properly to blow it out. A raised carbon dioxide caused calcium levels to lower and that cause tetany, another form of cramp.

Despite His horrendous pain and His breathing difficulties, Jesus managed to speak 7 times while on the Cross but only short words as he couldn't get enough breath to speak for longer.

Those words included words of forgiveness to all, 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do' as well His wonderful words to the good thief Dismas, words we all long to hear 'This day you will be with me in Paradise.'

One of the final words of Jesus was 'I Thirst' and many people including myself thought that Jesus was asking for something to drink as he had extreme thirst after all that blood loss, exertion and dehydration, but no, His thirst despite all that agony wasn't for water, it was a thirst to save our souls.

In the end Jesus died from heart failure as a result of not being able to breathe (asphyxia) and profound blood loss as well as shock from extreme pain.

When the centurion, Abenader, who was a tough Roman soldier who had been through many military campaigns, and was with Jesus most steps of The Crucifixion, saw His humility, His lack of complaining, His prayers for those who most unjustly treated Him and many other things, he was deeply moved. He had been in charge of many crucifixions and had never witnessed anything like this. He said loudly 'Blessed be the Most High God, the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob: indeed this Man was the Son of God!

He threw down his spear and got off his horse and went immediately to Pontius Pilate to resign his commission. He handed his leadership over to a subaltern a man called Cassius who then assumed command. The Roman soldiers were about to break the bones of the two thieves by smashing their arms below and above the elbows and then their legs above and below the knees, which made them unable to lift themselves up to breathe and caused rapid death from asphyxia. They realised that Jesus was already dead.

To make sure Jesus was dead and to keep the Pharisees from complaining, Cassius rode his horse over to Him and plunged his lance through the right side of His Chest and drove it right through His heart into the left side of His Chest. Blood and water spouted out, a sign that Jesus had completely bleed out all of His Blood. Some of the Blood and Water fell onto Cassius's face and an eye problem that he had for years and which many other soldiers mocked him for, disappeared but better than that, he came to believe like the centurion and resigned his post shortly after to become a Christian. He died a martyr not long later, killed by Roman soldiers for his faith.

Many other Roman soldiers were converted that day after they saw the example of Abenader the Centurion throwing down his lance and according to Anne Catherine Emmerich 28 Pharisees also became Christians.

Let us pray that we too will be truly converted and learn to love God as we should love Him.

As St Augustine summed it up, 'You have made us for Thyself O Lord and our hearts are restless until we rest in Thee.'

Finally, in these very troubled times when we are in a spiritual war that can only be won by spiritual means, let us remember the words of Our Lady to St Lucia of Fatima 'There is no problem I tell you, no problem no matter how difficult it is, that we cannot resolve by the prayer of the Holy Rosary'

**NEVER IS A MAN MORE MANLY THAN WHEN HE BENDS HIS KNEE BEFORE GOD!**