

Critical Reflections on the Reproaches of the Good Friday Liturgy

J. Frank Henderson

Frank Henderson's Site on Liturgy and Medieval Women
<http://www.compumart.ab.ca/fhenders>

© J. Frank Henderson 2001

Contents

The Reproaches
Anti-Jewish Aspects of the Reproaches
Possible Courses of Action
 Omission and Replacement
 Revision of the Text

The Reproaches or Improperia is a short, sung element of the Good Friday liturgy. It is sometimes understood to be anti-Jewish inasmuch as it can be read as accusing Jews of culpability for the death of Jesus.

This is one of a series of studies of the Good Friday liturgy. The others are:

Critical Reflections on the Passion Narrative of the Good Friday Liturgy
Critical Reflections on the Good Friday Liturgy: Anti-Judaism, Paschal Character,
 Relationship to Passion Sunday, Soteriology, Christology,
 the Preeminence of John
Re-visioning the Liturgy of Good Friday
Veneration of the Cross (Good Friday): Alternative Models

The Reproaches

The so-called Reproaches or Improperia is an ancient text intended to be sung (or spoken) during the veneration of the cross of the Good Friday liturgy. (This single text has a plural title inasmuch as it is composed of a number of individual verses; it will be spoken of here in the singular.)

At present the Reproaches is an optional text, though before 1970 the Latin text is was always used. It is a hymn, to be sung by a choir, which also contains refrains that may be sung by the people.

The following selections show the character of this text:

My people, what have I done to you?
How have I offended you? Answer me!

I led you out of Egypt, from slavery to freedom,
but you led your Savior to the cross.

My people, what have I done to you?
How have I offended you? Answer me?

For forty years I led you safely through the desert.
I fed you with manna from heaven
and brought you to a land of plenty;
but you led your Savior to the cross.

Anti-Jewish Aspects

John B. Sheerin, then on the staff of the U.S. Bishops' Secretariat for Catholics and Jews, made the following comments ca. 1980 [exact date is not known].

For some time the daily press has reported Jewish concern about the singing of the Reproaches on Good Friday in Catholic churches. These are hymns considered by many Jews to be anti-semitic. Some Catholics interpret them as Christ's rebukes to Christians for their sins and ingratitude but I can see why Jews interpret them as a parody on a sacred Jewish prayer and a rebuke to the Jewish people. Several Catholic attempts to revise the Reproaches have been unsuccessful but the American Bishops' Liturgical Committee has asked parishes this year to substitute other hymns for these Reproaches. The Episcopal Church has removed them from their new book of prayers but they remain

in the Catholic Sacramentary.

The United Methodist resource, *The New Handbook of the Christian Year* (p. 190), states:

A special word must be said concerning the Reproaches. Traditionally these were used to dramatize the accusations that God brings against his people in the light of the passion and death of Christ. They ask questions that reveal our own rebellion and complicity in the sufferings of Christ and in the evil and sufferings in the world. Images from scripture are used concerning Israel and God's hand in that holy history, but the accusations are clearly aimed at the faithlessness of all who would call upon God, particularly at all Christians in the church who presume to be grafted into the tree of Israel (Rom. 11:17-24). The accusations are like an inversion of the holy history we recite and recall in the Great Thanksgivings at the Lord's table.

We must all be aware, however, of the history of anti-Jewish sentiment which has often seen the crucifixion to be the work of the Jews. This is abhorrent, especially in the light of modern consequences of anti-Semitism and its continuing presence within the Christian community. For those situations where the Reproaches may give the impression of anti-Jewish convictions, they should not be used.

[H. L. Hickman, Don E. Saliers, L.H. Stookey, J.F. White, *The New Handbook of the Christian Year: Based on the Revised Common Lectionary*. Nashville: Abingdon 1986, 1992]

Possible Courses of Action

Omission and Replacement

Sheerin notes that the Reproaches is an optional text, and that already ca. 1980 the U.S. bishops suggested that it be omitted and replaced by another song. Later, they suggested that Psalm 22 be used in its place.

In addition, the traditional text of the Reproaches may be difficult for the assembly to sing; it is not easily accommodated by contemporary musical idioms. In practice, therefore, some other song is often substituted for it.

Revision of the Text

Sheerin also noted that revised texts had been constructed, but that these had not been adopted for use in the Roman Catholic liturgy. United Methodist liturgical resources (*The New*

Handbook of the Christian Year, pp. 187-189) offer a revised version of the Reproaches.

Some verses follow the pattern of the ancient text:

I led you through the desert forty years,
and fed you with manna:
I brought you through tribulation and penitence,
and gave you my body, the bread of heaven,
but you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

I went before you in a pillar of cloud,
and you have led me to the judgment hall of Pilate.
I scourged your enemies and brought you to a land of freedom,
but you have scourged, mocked, and beaten me.
I gave you the water of salvation from the rock,
but you have given me gall and left me to thirst.

In addition, several completely new verses have been composed, for example:

I grafted you into the tree of my chosen Israel,
and you turned on them with persecution and mass murder.
I made you joint heirs with them of my covenants,
but you made them scapegoats for your own guilt.

I came to you as the least of your brothers and sisters;
I was hungry and you gave me no food,
I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,
I was a stranger and you did not welcome me,
naked and you did not clothe me,
sick and in prison and you did not visit me.

The New Handbook of the Christian Year (p. 190) also suggests that □ it is also possible to create a contemporary version from images born of our own rebellion and abuse of God's good gifts - though care should be taken not to make this ecological alone; the theological point of the accusations and responses is central. □

The idea of Christ speaking to us from the cross, more generally offers a number of possibilities for this part of the liturgy. A student of mine composed □ Challenges from the Cross, □ of which two verses are provided here (with permission):

O my people, O my Church,
I created a world with enough resources for everyone.
Why do young children die of hunger each day?

Why are there street children in Guatemala?

Answer me! (Response)

O my people, O my Church,

I created people to live in community and to help one another.

Why is there war in Kosovo?

Why are my children crying and lone in Rwanda, Northern Ireland, Afghanistan?

Answer me! (Response)

Conclusion

Because the Reproaches is an option, it is a simple matter to avoid its use.