

Jews in the clear on death of Christ

Barney Zwartz, Sydney Morning Herald, 4 March 2011

FOR centuries, the Jews of Europe dreaded the cry of "Christ killers", which preceded the rampaging mob murdering, raping and burning their homes, particularly in the pogroms in eastern Europe between the 1700s and World War II.

Usually engineered by the government of the day to distract the Christian majority from their own troubles, the pogroms were whipped up from the pulpits of Catholic and Orthodox churches.

Now the verdict is official: the Jews bear no collective responsibility for the death of Christ. Pope Benedict XVI yesterday became the first Pope to contradict personally the teaching of Jewish "blood guilt", releasing excerpts from a book to be published next week.



Illustration: Ron Tandberg.

That teaching, used to justify and perpetuate hatred culminating in the murder of 6 million Jews in the Holocaust, was formally rebutted by the 1960s Vatican Council, but the Pope's personal endorsement was welcomed yesterday by Jewish leaders as a landmark attack on the foundation of anti-Semitism.

"So we can't send him the bill for the Last Supper?" joked a Melbourne Jewish leader, Rabbi John Levi.

"I'm glad he said it. It's important to say it. But it raises all sorts of future problems regarding the reading of Christian Scripture."

The Pope's detailed exposition of why blaming the Jews is biblically and theologically wrong is part of the second volume of his series on Jesus Christ, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week*.

According to the publisher Ignatius Press, volume two looks at many controversial questions, including whether Jesus was a political revolutionary, what he taught about the end of the world, how he interpreted his own death, whether he really rose from the dead and what the early Christians believed about his second coming.

The Pope concludes that the blame belongs to certain Jewish leaders and a few supporters of the revolutionary Barabbas who, according to the Bible, was spared in Jesus's place. Roman authorities generally get a mention, too.

There are many verses in the New Testament that have been used to justify persecution, especially the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 27, which tells of Pilate washing his hands of Jesus's death sentence: "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility." All the people answered: "Let his blood be on us and on our children."

However, according to Melbourne Catholic theologian Brendan Byrne, that verse was written after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70AD.

The inhabitants needed a theological justification for this calamity, and the Christians found it in the Crucifixion.

"The 'our children' is the next generation, and that's where it stops. It's not a particularly attractive motif even as it stands, but in no way is it meant to continue down the generations," Father Byrne said yesterday.

The Pope agreed, writing that Jesus's blood was shed for salvation, not punishment. It did not cry out for vengeance, it brought reconciliation.

The Pope has a strong record on Jewish relations, but with a couple of hiccups.

As a young teenager he had no choice about joining Hitler Youth, and as Pope he has visited Auschwitz, the worst World War II extermination camp, and Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem.

But he aroused Jewish ire by lifting the excommunication of a Holocaust-denying bishop last year and by restoring a Latin Mass that in its Good Friday liturgy refers to "perfidious Jews".

Warren Fineburg, executive director of Melbourne's Jewish Holocaust Centre, said the Pope's remarks were a powerful statement that would contradict past teachings from the pulpit.

"It's not the only major faith in which anti-Semitism is evident. It's possibly less to do with the church itself, but the teaching has given thugs an excuse to perpetrate their horrors," he said.