

Catechism of the Catholic Church: #595-637

Review Questions

1. Why does the *Catechism* teach that one cannot blame the Jewish people as a whole for Jesus' passion and death?
2. Who, according to the *Catechism*, is responsible for Jesus' passion and death?
3. According to #601-602, why did Jesus die?
4. What does it mean to say that Christ's death is a Paschal sacrifice? ... is a sacrifice of the New Covenant?
5. Does the *Catechism* teach that Jesus really died, that his soul actually separated from his human body?
6. Before Jesus' resurrection, who existed in the "abode of the dead" (Sheol, Hades, or "hell") (#633)? What was "fulfilled" by Jesus' descent to hell (#634)? Why does the Catholic Church teach that Jesus "went down into the depths of death" (#635) during the interval between his death and resurrection?

I. The Trial of Jesus

Divisions among the Jewish authorities concerning Jesus

595. Among the religious authorities of Jerusalem, not only were the Pharisee Nicodemus and the prominent Joseph of Arimathea both secret disciples of Jesus, but there was also long-standing dissension about him, so much so that St. John says of these authorities on the very eve of Christ's Passion, "many . . . believed in him," though very imperfectly.³⁷⁸ This is not surprising, if one recalls that on the day after Pentecost "a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith" and "some believers . . . belonged to the party of the Pharisees," to the point that St. James could tell St. Paul, "How many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed; and they are all zealous for the Law."³⁷⁹

596. The religious authorities in Jerusalem were not unanimous about what stance to take toward Jesus.³⁸⁰ The Pharisees threatened to excommunicate his followers.³⁸¹ To those who feared that "everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation," the high priest Caiaphas replied by prophesying: "It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish."³⁸² The Sanhedrin, having declared Jesus deserving of death as a blasphemer but having lost the right to put anyone to death, hands him over to the Romans, accusing him of political revolt, a charge that puts him in the same category as Barabbas who had been accused of sedition.³⁸³ The high priests also threatened Pilate politically so that he would condemn Jesus to death.³⁸⁴

Jews are not collectively responsible for Jesus' death

597. The historical complexity of Jesus' trial is apparent in the Gospel accounts. The personal sin of the participants (Judas, the Sanhedrin, Pilate) is known to God alone. Hence we cannot lay responsibility for the trial on the Jews in Jerusalem as a whole, despite the outcry of a manipulated crowd and the global reproaches contained in the apostles' calls to conversion after Pentecost.³⁸⁵ Jesus himself, in forgiving them on the cross, and Peter in following suit, both accept "the ignorance" of the Jews of Jerusalem and even of their leaders.³⁸⁶ Still less can we extend responsibility to other Jews of different times and places, based merely on the crowd's cry: "His blood be on us and on our children!" a formula for ratifying a judicial sentence.³⁸⁷ As the Church declared at the Second Vatican Council:

. . . [N]either all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his Passion. . . . [T]he Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy Scripture.³⁸⁸

All sinners were the authors of Christ's Passion

598. In her Magisterial teaching of the faith and in the witness of her saints, the Church has never forgotten that "sinners were the authors and the ministers of all the sufferings that the divine Redeemer endured."³⁸⁹ Taking into account the fact that our sins affect Christ himself,³⁹⁰ the Church does not hesitate to impute to Christians the gravest responsibility for the torments inflicted upon Jesus, a responsibility with which they have all too often burdened the Jews alone:

We must regard as guilty all those who continue to relapse into their sins. Since our sins made the Lord Christ suffer the torment of the cross, those who plunge themselves into disorders and crimes crucify the Son of God anew in their hearts (for he is in them) and hold him up to contempt. And it can be seen that our crime in this case is greater in us than in the Jews. As for them, according to the witness of the Apostle, "None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." We, however, profess to know him. And when we deny him by our deeds, we in some way seem to lay violent hands on him.³⁹¹

Nor did demons crucify him; it is you who have crucified him and crucify him still, when you delight in your vices and sins.³⁹²

II. Christ's Redemptive Death in God's Plan of Salvation

"Jesus handed over according to the definite plan of God"

599. Jesus' violent death was not the result of chance in an unfortunate coincidence of circumstances, but is part of the mystery of God's plan, as St. Peter explains to the Jews of Jerusalem in his first sermon on Pentecost: "This Jesus [was] delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God."³⁹³ This Biblical LANGUAGE does not mean that those who handed him over were merely passive players in a scenario written in advance by God.³⁹⁴

600. To God, all moments of time are present in their immediacy. When therefore he establishes his eternal plan of "predestination," he includes in it each person's free response to his grace: "In this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."³⁹⁵ For the sake of accomplishing his plan of salvation, God permitted the acts that flowed from their blindness.³⁹⁶

"He died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures"

601. The Scriptures had foretold this divine plan of salvation through the putting to death of "the righteous one, my Servant" as a mystery of universal redemption, that is, as the ransom that would free men from the slavery of sin.³⁹⁷ Citing a confession of faith that he himself had "received," St. Paul professes that "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures."³⁹⁸ In particular Jesus' redemptive death fulfills Isaiah's prophecy of the suffering Servant.³⁹⁹ Indeed Jesus himself explained the meaning of his life and death in the light of God's suffering Servant.⁴⁰⁰ After his Resurrection he gave this interpretation of the Scriptures to the disciples at Emmaus, and then to the apostles.⁴⁰¹

"For our sake God made him to be sin"

602. Consequently, St. Peter can formulate the apostolic faith in the divine plan of salvation in this way: "You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers . . . with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of the times for your sake."⁴⁰² Man's sins, following on original sin, are

punishable by death.⁴⁰³ By sending his own Son in the form of a slave, in the form of a fallen humanity, on account of sin, God "made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."⁴⁰⁴

603. Jesus did not experience reprobation as if he himself had sinned.⁴⁰⁵ But in the redeeming love that always united him to the Father, he assumed us in the state of our waywardness of sin, to the point that he could say in our name from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"⁴⁰⁶ Having thus established him in solidarity with us sinners, God "did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all," so that we might be "reconciled to God by the death of his Son."⁴⁰⁷

God takes the initiative of universal redeeming love

604. By giving up his own Son for our sins, God manifests that his plan for us is one of benevolent love, prior to any merit on our part: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins."⁴⁰⁸ God "shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us."⁴⁰⁹

605. At the end of the parable of the lost sheep Jesus recalled that God's love excludes no one: "So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."⁴¹⁰ He affirms that he came "to give his life as a ransom for many"; this last term is not restrictive, but contrasts the whole of humanity with the unique person of the redeemer who hands himself over to save us.⁴¹¹ The Church, following the apostles, teaches that Christ died for all men without exception: "There is not, never has been, and never will be a single human being for whom Christ did not suffer."⁴¹²

III. Christ Offered Himself to His Father for Our Sins

Christ's whole life is an offering to the Father

606. The Son of God, who came down "from heaven, not to do [his] own will, but the will of him who sent [him],"⁴¹³ said on coming into the world, "Lo, I have come to do your will, O God." "And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."⁴¹⁴ From the first moment of his Incarnation the Son embraces the Father's plan of divine salvation in his redemptive mission: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work."⁴¹⁵ The sacrifice of Jesus "for the sins of the whole world"⁴¹⁶ expresses his loving communion with the Father. "The Father loves me, because I lay down my life," said the Lord, "[for] I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father."⁴¹⁷

607. The desire to embrace his Father's plan of redeeming love inspired Jesus' whole life,⁴¹⁸ for his redemptive passion was the very reason for his Incarnation. And so he asked, "And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour."⁴¹⁹ And again, "Shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?"⁴²⁰ From the cross, just before "It is finished," he said, "I thirst."⁴²¹

"The Lamb who takes away the sin of the world"

608. After agreeing to baptize him along with the sinners, John the Baptist looked at Jesus and pointed him out as the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."⁴²² By doing so, he reveals that Jesus is at the same time the suffering Servant who silently allows himself to be led to the slaughter and who bears the sin of the multitudes, and also the Paschal Lamb, the symbol of Israel's redemption at the first Passover.⁴²³ Christ's whole life expresses his mission: "to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."⁴²⁴

Jesus freely embraced the Father's redeeming love

609. By embracing in his human heart the Father's love for men, Jesus "loved them to the end," for "greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."⁴²⁵ In suffering and death his humanity became the free and perfect instrument of his divine love which desires the salvation of men.⁴²⁶ Indeed, out of love for his Father and for men, whom the Father wants to save, Jesus freely accepted his Passion and death: "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."⁴²⁷ Hence the sovereign freedom of God's Son as he went out to his death.⁴²⁸

At the Last Supper Jesus anticipated the free offering of his life

610. Jesus gave the supreme expression of his free offering of himself at the meal shared with the twelve Apostles "on the night he was betrayed."⁴²⁹ On the eve of his Passion, while still free, Jesus transformed this Last Supper with the apostles into the memorial of his voluntary offering to the Father for the salvation of men: "This is my body which is given for you." "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."⁴³⁰

611. The Eucharist that Christ institutes at that moment will be the memorial of his sacrifice.⁴³¹ Jesus includes the apostles in his own offering and bids them perpetuate it.⁴³² By doing so, the Lord institutes his apostles as priests of the New Covenant: "For their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth."⁴³³

The agony at Gethsemani

612. The cup of the New Covenant, which Jesus anticipated when he offered himself at the Last Supper, is afterwards accepted by him from his Father's hands in his agony in the garden at Gethsemani,⁴³⁴ making himself "obedient unto death." Jesus prays: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. . . ."⁴³⁵ Thus he expresses the horror that death represented for his human nature. Like ours, his human nature is destined for eternal life; but unlike ours, it is perfectly exempt from sin, the cause of death.⁴³⁶ Above all, his human nature has been assumed by the divine person of the "Author of life," the "Living One."⁴³⁷ By accepting in his human will that the Father's will be done, he accepts his death as redemptive, for "he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree."⁴³⁸

Christ's death is the unique and definitive sacrifice

613. Christ's death is both the Paschal sacrifice that accomplishes the definitive redemption of men, through "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,"⁴³⁹ and the *sacrifice of the New Covenant*, which restores man to communion with God by reconciling him to God through the "blood of the covenant, which was poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."⁴⁴⁰

614. This sacrifice of Christ is unique; it completes and surpasses all other sacrifices.⁴⁴¹ First, it is a gift from God the Father himself, for the Father handed his Son over to sinners in order to reconcile us with himself. At the same time it is the offering of the Son of God made man, who in freedom and love offered his life to his Father through the Holy Spirit in reparation for our disobedience.⁴⁴²

Jesus substitutes his obedience for our disobedience

615. "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous."⁴⁴³ By his obedience unto death, Jesus accomplished the substitution of the suffering Servant, who "makes himself an *offering for sin*," when "he bore the sin of many," and who "shall make

many to be accounted righteous," for "he shall bear their iniquities."⁴⁴⁴ Jesus atoned for our faults and made satisfaction for our sins to the Father.⁴⁴⁵

Jesus consummates his sacrifice on the Cross

616. It is love "to the end"⁴⁴⁶ that confers on Christ's sacrifice its value as redemption and reparation, as atonement and satisfaction. He knew and loved us all when he offered his life.⁴⁴⁷ Now "the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died."⁴⁴⁸ No man, not even the holiest, was ever able to take on himself the sins of all men and offer himself as a sacrifice for all. The existence in Christ of the divine person of the Son, who at once surpasses and embraces all human persons and constitutes himself as the Head of all mankind, makes possible his redemptive sacrifice *for all*.

617. The Council of Trent emphasizes the unique character of Christ's sacrifice as "the source of eternal salvation"⁴⁴⁹ and teaches that "his most holy Passion on the wood of the cross merited justification for us."⁴⁵⁰ And the Church venerates his cross as it sings: "Hail, O Cross, our only hope."⁴⁵¹

Our participation in Christ's sacrifice

618. The cross is the unique sacrifice of Christ, the "one mediator between God and men."⁴⁵² But because in his incarnate divine person he has in some way united himself to every man, "the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery" is offered to all men.⁴⁵³ He calls his disciples to "take up [their] cross and follow [him],"⁴⁵⁴ for "Christ also suffered for [us], leaving [us] an example so that [we] should follow in his steps."⁴⁵⁵ In fact Jesus desires to associate with his redeeming sacrifice those who were to be its first beneficiaries.⁴⁵⁶ This is achieved supremely in the case of his mother, who was associated more intimately than any other person in the mystery of his redemptive suffering.⁴⁵⁷

Apart from the cross there is no other ladder by which we may get to heaven.⁴⁵⁸

IN BRIEF

619. "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (*1 Cor 15:3*).

620. Our salvation flows from God's initiative of love for us, because "he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (*1 Jn 4:10*). "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (*2 Cor 5:19*).

621. Jesus freely offered himself for our salvation. Beforehand, during the Last Supper, he both symbolized this offering and made it really present: "This is my body which is given for you" (*Lk 22:19*).

622. The redemption won by Christ consists in this, that he came "to give his life as a ransom for many" (*Mt 20:28*), that is, he "loved [his own] to the end" (*Jn 13:1*), so that they might be "ransomed from the futile ways inherited from [their] fathers" (*1 Pet 1:18*).

623. By his loving obedience to the Father, "unto death, even death on a cross" (*Phil 2:8*), Jesus fulfills the atoning mission (cf. *Isa 53:10*) of the suffering Servant, who will "make many righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities" (*Isa 53:11*; cf. *Rom 5:19*).

Jesus Christ Was Buried

624. "By the grace of God" Jesus tasted death "for every one."⁴⁵⁹ In his plan of salvation, God ordained that his Son should not only "die for our sins"⁴⁶⁰ but should also "taste death," experience the condition of death, the separation of his soul from his body, between the time he expired on the cross and the time he

was raised from the dead. The state of the dead Christ is the mystery of the tomb and the descent into hell. It is the mystery of Holy Saturday, when Christ, lying in the tomb,⁴⁶¹ reveals God's great sabbath rest⁴⁶² after the fulfillment⁴⁶³ of man's salvation, which brings peace to the whole universe.⁴⁶⁴

Christ in the tomb in his body

625. Christ's stay in the tomb constitutes the real link between his passible state before Easter and his glorious and risen state today. The same person of the "Living One" can say, "I died, and behold I am alive for evermore":⁴⁶⁵

God [the Son] did not impede death from separating his soul from his body according to the necessary order of nature, but has reunited them to one another in the Resurrection, *so that he himself might be, in his person, the meeting point for death and life*, by arresting in himself the decomposition of nature produced by death and so becoming the source of reunion for the separated parts.⁴⁶⁶

626. Since the "Author of life" who was killed⁴⁶⁷ is the same "living one [who has] risen,"⁴⁶⁸ the divine person of the Son of God necessarily continued to possess his human soul and body, separated from each other by death:

By the fact that at Christ's death his soul was separated from his flesh, his one person is not itself divided into two persons; for the human body and soul of Christ have existed in the same way from the beginning of his earthly existence, in the divine person of the Word; and in death, although separated from each other, both remained with one and the same person of the Word.⁴⁶⁹

"You will not let your Holy One see corruption"

627. Christ's death was a real death in that it put an end to his earthly human existence. But because of the union which the person of the Son retained with his body, his was not a mortal corpse like others, for "it was not possible for death to hold him"⁴⁷⁰ and therefore "divine power preserved Christ's body from corruption."⁴⁷¹ Both of these statements can be said of Christ: "He was cut off out of the land of the living,"⁴⁷² and "My flesh will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let your Holy One see corruption."⁴⁷³ Jesus' Resurrection "on the third day" was the sign of this also, because bodily decay was held to begin on the fourth day after death.⁴⁷⁴

"Buried with Christ . . ."

628. Baptism, the original and full sign of which is immersion, efficaciously signifies the descent into the tomb by the Christian who dies to sin with Christ in order to live a new life. "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."⁴⁷⁵

IN BRIEF

629. To the benefit of every man, Jesus Christ tasted death (cf. *Heb 2:9*). It is truly the Son of God made man who died and was buried.

630. During Christ's period in the tomb, his divine person continued to assume both his soul and his body, although they were separated from each other by death. For this reason the dead Christ's body "saw no corruption" (*Acts 13:37*).

631. Jesus "descended into the lower parts of the earth. He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens."⁴⁷⁶ The Apostles' Creed confesses in the same article Christ's descent into hell and

his Resurrection from the dead on the third day, because in his Passover it was precisely out of the depths of death that he made life spring forth:

Christ, that Morning Star, who came back from the dead,
and shed his peaceful light on all mankind,
your Son who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.⁴⁷⁷

Christ Descended into Hell

632. The frequent New Testament affirmations that Jesus was "raised from the dead" presuppose that the crucified one sojourned in the realm of the dead prior to his resurrection.⁴⁷⁸ This was the first meaning given in the apostolic preaching to Christ's descent into hell: that Jesus, like all men, experienced death and in his soul joined the others in the realm of the dead. But he descended there as Savior, proclaiming the Good News to the spirits imprisoned there.⁴⁷⁹

633. Scripture calls the abode of the dead, to which the dead Christ went down, "hell"—*Sheol* in Hebrew or *Hades* in Greek—because those who are there are deprived of the vision of God.⁴⁸⁰ Such is the case for all the dead, whether evil or righteous, while they await the redeemer: which does not mean that their lot is identical, as Jesus shows through the parable of the poor man Lazarus who was received into "Abraham's bosom":⁴⁸¹ "It is precisely these holy souls, who awaited their Savior in Abraham's bosom, whom Christ the Lord delivered when he descended into hell."⁴⁸² Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him.⁴⁸³

634. "The gospel was preached even to the dead."⁴⁸⁴ The descent into hell brings the Gospel message of salvation to complete fulfillment. This is the last phase of Jesus' messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ's redemptive work to all men of all times and all places, for all who are saved have been made sharers in the redemption.

635. Christ went down into the depths of death so that "the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live."⁴⁸⁵ Jesus, "the Author of life," by dying destroyed "him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and [delivered] all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage."⁴⁸⁶ Henceforth the risen Christ holds "the keys of Death and Hades," so that "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth."⁴⁸⁷

Today a great silence reigns on earth, a great silence and a great stillness. A great silence because the King is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began. . . . He has gone to search for Adam, our first father, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrow Adam in his bonds and Eve, captive with him—He who is both their God and the son of Eve. . . . "I am your God, who for your sake have become your son. . . . I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be a prisoner in hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead."⁴⁸⁸

IN BRIEF

636. By the expression "He descended into hell," the Apostles' Creed confesses that Jesus did really die and through his death for us conquered death and the devil "who has the power of death" (*Heb 2:14*).

637. In his human soul united to his divine person, the dead Christ went down to the realm of the dead. He opened heaven's gates for the just who had gone before him.