

Crucified

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Among Poland's many Easter-time traditions are mystery plays which act out the Passion and Resurrection. Playing the role of Christ in such dramas, albeit difficult, is not an act of penance for actors, but rather a symbolic act in praise of the Savior

The anthropology of religion is now a buoyant field of research in Poland, probing more and more issues and seeking to explain more and more phenomena. In view of the all-pervasive nature of religious events and the interest and media attention they attract, conceptual frameworks which allow such events to be interpreted are also gaining in popularity.

One of the elements of contemporary religion that offers fruitful academic study is the nature of people's participation in various religious "events". In Poland, these include the increasingly more frequent passion plays, staged at Easter. Although the study of such "mystery plays" looks at the participation of both audience and actors, its greatest interest naturally concentrates on the actor playing the main role, Christ, and how he is affected by the role. The daunting task faced by the men playing Christ is undoubtedly the most important and thus difficult, as the full attention of the audience and other actors remains focused upon them. The degree of difficulty involved in the role depends on the production itself. Not all organizers require actors to play out the most difficult, arduous scene of the crucifixion, and sometimes the event itself is concealed from the audience's view. Moreover, some passion plays are staged in monasteries or church interiors, protecting actors against the early spring cold, sometimes rain and snow.

Yet there are plays that are staged outdoors and depict all the scenes of the Passion, including the crucifixion, thus demanding great dedication and devotion from actors. The present author has so far participated in two such events, in Poznań in 2006 and Kalwaria Paławska in 2007. Although these two passion plays differed, they shared a painstaking attention given to recreating the scene of Christ's crucifixion.

Among those who act in passion plays, such participation is perceived differently by each individual. Their decision to take part is usually motivated by their faith, by an urge to be involved in an extraordinary event. Most of the roles do not pose great difficulties for actors, but there are more difficult ones which spark strong emotions, i.e. Pilate and Judas, and Christ is the most difficult of all to play. This is mainly because actors themselves often have a sense that they are unfit to play the role of the Savior. However, they treat this problem as a very personal one frequently difficult for them to express, finding it much easier to speak of the hardships involved in the required physical effort. In short, the individuals who play Christ face a daunting and exhausting task each year.

Playing the role of Christ

In Kalwaria Paławska, trudging through mud, such an actor must alone carry a wooden cross up the local Golgotha. Without stopping, without rest he has to make it up a more than 100 meter rise. In Poznań, the route of the cross is shorter and easier, as here Christ travels some 50 meters along a fixed platform. Yet at the end, like the actor in Kalwaria Paławska, he has to face further difficulties: a risky scene when the cross with the "nailed" Christ is raised, and then, half-naked, spending

Passion plays are growing to be an increasingly important element of religious life in Poland

some quarter of an hour hanging on the cross. In years when Easter falls in early spring, actors playing Christ hang there shivering from the cold. And although some of them later fall ill, they do not get discouraged: the very same actors return to the cross the next year.

Sacrifice?

When observing these Polish passion plays, these frozen actors bound to crosses, one might nonetheless conclude that their deeds demand much less sacrifice than, for instance, those of certain Filipinos who allow themselves to be nailed to their crosses. But there is a vast difference between a Polish actor, reenacting Christ's role, and a Filipino imitating Jesus' suffering by being actually nailed. The way they experience their time spent on the cross also differs significantly.

In the Philippines, being nailed to the cross is not an element of any production, it is an personal form of penance



In passion plays, the boundary between the audience and actors becomes blurred: often the same individuals form part of the audience in one year, but play a specific role the next

or thanksgiving which the individual performs by offering God his own suffering. At the same time his offering is a kind of imitation of Christ, who offered his own suffering for people. But most importantly, while hanging on the cross, such penitents remain themselves, they are not playing Christ – unlike the actors in passion plays, who recreate the scene of Jesus' crucifixion and thus their time on the cross is not interpreted as an act of penance.

While these actors often view their participation as a gift to God, they do not interpret it as an act of suffering and difficulty offered up to God, but rather as a beautiful act performed in God's praise. Being nailed to the cross would destroy that act. Passion play actors try to depict the character and actions of Jesus to the audience, not actually imitate them. Nailing the actor's hands to the cross would be all too real; it would blur the boundary between acting and attempting to equate oneself with Jesus. The actors therefore maintain a certain distance to their role, stressing that they are merely striving to show the audience Christ's fate, not to meld with the role they are playing. The passion play portrayal of Christ must remain a

symbolic act, just as all other visual depictions of God are symbolic, since no one is worthy of "becoming" Christ. For religious individuals that is something so obvious it does not even have to be verbalized. As a result, talking to actors about preparing for the role of Christ frequently boils down to stories about the grueling cross-carrying route, shivering while on it, attempting with greater or lesser success to use heating lotions, and having an ambulance waiting nearby. Because in this case, a symbolic act in fact takes a very real physical toll. ■

Further reading:

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