

Pope says Jews not to blame for Jesus' death

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) The Jewish people as a whole were not responsible for Jesus' crucifixion, and their descendants have not inherited blame for his death, Pope Benedict XVI writes in a new book to be published on March 10.

The statements appear in excerpts, which were released Wednesday (March 2), from "Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance Into Jerusalem To The Resurrection," the sequel to Benedict's 2007 best-seller, "Jesus of Nazareth."

"Who insisted that Jesus be condemned to death?" Benedict writes in the new book. Noting that the Gospel of John says simply, "the Jews," Benedict explains that this expression "does not at all indicate -- as the modern reader might tend to interpret it -- the people of Israel as such, and even less does it have a 'racist' character."

Noting that Jesus and all his original followers were Jews, Benedict writes that the term refers in this case specifically to the "aristocracy of the temple," or the leading priests who called for Jesus' death.

Benedict also explains the statement, "may his blood be on us and on our children," attributed to the Jews in the Gospel of Matthew, is not a curse but actually a kind of blessing.

"The Christian will remember that the blood of Christ ... is not spilled against anyone but ... for many, for all," Benedict writes. "Read from the point of view of the faith, this means that we all need the purifying force of love, and that force is his blood. These words are not a curse, but redemption, salvation."

The book, while not bearing the weight of official church teaching or dogma, is nonetheless likely to help Benedict's relations with Jews. Critics have questioned his moves to approve a Good Friday prayer that calls for Jews' salvation, and also to readmit a schismatic bishop who turned out to be a vocal denier of the Holocaust.

Benedict's statement is consistent with official Catholic teaching on the subject that was overhauled in the 1960s, when the Second Vatican Council declared Jesus' passion "cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today."

Abraham H. Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, called Benedict's new book an "important and historic moment for Catholic-Jewish relations" that will help transmit longstanding church teaching "down to the pews."

In another excerpt from the forthcoming book, Benedict emphasizes the political role of Barabbas, the man whom Pontius Pilate released to the crowds calling for Jesus' death.

"John describes Barabbas, according to our translations, simply as a 'brigand.' But in the political context of the time, the Greek word he uses would have also had the sense of 'terrorist,' or 'resistance fighter,'" Benedict writes.

"Humanity will always find itself anew before such a choice," as the option between Jesus and Barabbas, Benedict writes: "To say `yes' to what God does only through the power of truth and love or to reckon on the concrete, on that which is in reach, on violence."