**Faith or Folly?**

*by Harry Osborne*

# Though unable to make a Spring trip to the Philippines this year, I have been there several times during this holiday period, known to them and many others as “Holy Week.” The following article [*Extreme religious acts mark Good Friday in the Philippines*, AFP news agency, 4/14/17] chronicles the actions typically associated with this week of the year in the Philippines:

Whipping their backs to a bloody state and nailing themselves to crosses, devotees in the fervently Catholic Philippines marked Good Friday with extreme acts of faith that have become tourist attractions.

In towns north of Manila at least five people were nailed to crosses, while in an island to the south hundreds of residents dressed up as Roman centurions as part of decades-old traditions in the Southeast Asian nation.

These customs flourish, although they are not officially endorsed by church leadership.

In the island of Marinduque, about 150 kilometres (100 miles) south of the capital, residents in centurion outfits and heavy wooden masks, played at hunting down a renegade Roman soldier called St. Longinus.

Legends say Longinus thrust his spear through the side of the crucified Christ.

Christ's blood spurted on his face, healing the centurion's blindness and convincing him to change sides.

The climax of the week-long drama is on Saturday when the centurions capture Longinus and dramatically "behead" him.

Organiser Raymond Nepomuceno said they were now encouraging children to take part even if they used lighter plastic or fibreglass masks.

"I feel like it's a dying culture and to preserve it for the new generation we let the children join whether as a vow (to God) or just to enjoy," he told AFP.

Nemesio de los Reyes said he was taking part in the re-enactment so he and his family would remain healthy.

"Being a Morion (centurion) is part of my vow in life. While I'm still strong and healthy I will do this. It's also my sacrifice and I´m hoping that my prayers will be answered that my friends and family will stay healthy," he said.

Half-naked men showed their devotion in a cemetery by flogging their backs that had earlier been sliced by a razor as part of their vow to God.

"I've been doing this for 15 years. I do this so my sins will be forgiven," said Sammy Matre.

Newcomer John Allen Jamig, 17, briefly fainted after his flogging drew blood.

"I don´t know why I felt dizzy, I think because I didn´t have enough sleep last night," he insisted.

In San Pedro village north of Manila, 56-year-old Ruben Enaje underwent his 31st crucifixion after surviving a construction accident.

Dozens of other devotees whipped their backs in a macabre procession under the burning sun, with foreigners and local tourists in the normally sleepy village watching the spectacle in awe.

In a nod to commercialism, vendors hawked soft drinks, snacks, hats and umbrellas with banners of major telecom firm Smart Communications, a sponsor of the Good Friday event, in the background.

No one could deny the sincerity of those willing to undergo such brutal acts on their bodies as to be whipped, cut or even nailed to a cross. It is obvious that such people not only believe that such acts are good, but also that they will be beneficial to themselves or others in some way. However, even the most ardent of religious people in this country would likely view such acts as too extreme and oppose them as self-destructive or even barbaric. With this example before us, let us make some observations that come to mind:

(1) **The sincerity of a belief does not make it acceptable to God.** We know that Paul was sincere in his belief and action of persecuting Christians, but he was wrong and sinned in doing so (Acts 26:9-16). We may believe or feel that a practice is right, yet it may actually be deadly to the soul (Prov. 14:12; 16:25).

(2) **Proof of biblical “faith” is not found in the extremes one may endure, but by comparing that person’s actions to the teaching of God’s word.** The gospel tells us where true faith originates: “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). That is why people of faith limit their teaching and practice to the things authorized by God (Col. 3:17).

(3) **Human tradition added in religious service is not pleasing to God.** Jesus condemned the addition of human commands and traditions to God’s law, calling it “vain” (Mk. 7:7-9). To heed the commandments of men is to turn away from Christ and His truth (Col. 2:8; Titus 1:14).

(4) **The forgiveness of sins or others blessings of God are not earned by severe acts to merit God’s favor, but by grace through faith.** All who have sinned have earned its wages of death, but God’s blessings are a gift (Rom. 6:23). Man cannot devise any work to merit God’s favor once condemned due to our sins, but must by faith rely upon His grace and obey the “good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:1-10; cf. Titus 2:11-12). The blood of Christ is the purchase price necessary to take away our sins (Heb. 9:14; 1 Pet. 1:18-19). We contact that blood by appealing to God for salvation in baptism, an act designed by God that seeks His gift on the basis of Christ’s sacrifice (1 Pet. 3:21; Rom. 6:3-6).

(5) **The death of Jesus Christ upon the cross fully provided the means of salvation.** That sacrifice was given for all people (Heb. 2:9; 1 Tim. 2:3-6). Further, the death of Christ was a one time offering that fully satisfied the needs of salvation for all time (Heb. 9:27-28; 1 Pet. 3:18).

(6) **Those who condone such actions are also condemned.** Every year, accounts are published as these annual acts of bloodshed, self-flagellation and human crucifixion are repeated by devoted Catholics in the Philippines. To be fair, as noted in the above article, “they are not officially endorsed by church leadership.” However, the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church could stop it in a moment by condemning such actions. They have not done so. While the corporate sponsors and tourists watching the spectacle do not inflict the carnage on the people enduring mutilation and crucifixion, they do nothing to stop it. The word of God plainly declares that those who practice sin “are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them” (Rom. 1:32). The gospel requires that we not only refrain from sinful actions ourselves, but also “expose” or “reprove” them (Eph. 5:11; cf. Prov. 28:4).

No, I doubt many would engage in the same self-destructive acts as those reported in this news account, but the same principles condemn many religious beliefs and practices deemed less “extreme.” Let us strive to limit our actions to the practices prescribed in the only true and perfect standard for our conduct – the word of God (2 Tim. 3:16-17).