

Hey there!

I wish you were here with me on this trip to Israel. I'm here with my boyfriend and his family for a family Bar Mitzvah. His family is Israeli and Jewish, although his folks have lived in the states for awhile. Anyway, as it was Shabbat today, none of the Jewish things were open, but it gave us a great chance to visit a lot of the Christian sites with a tour guide. She told us a great deal as we visited the Olive Mount, a number of Churches, and some other important sites. We came up with a lot of questions about Catholic beliefs and traditions and I wanted to ask you a few questions.

This is a partial list, and pardon me if it's phrased in a way that is totally ignorant... At the Mount of Olives, we visited the Church of Agony, and in it was the rock where Jesus was in agony.

- **Why was he in agony?**
- **What is the "cup" that they talk about?**
- **Is he sad that he's leaving before his work is done?**
- **Is he sad because he doesn't want to die?**
- **Or because he's scared?**

Dear Laura,

Let me attempt to “answer” your question about the agony of Christ. They are deep and rich, and will not be done great justice in the short reflections that I offer, but what the hell, here we go!

“Agony” is a term that comes from “agonia”, the Latin for “struggle”. Jesus’ experience in the garden of Gethsemane is indeed that of a struggle, an inner struggle, an inner struggle preceding his imminent death, an inner struggle with respect to the suffering associated with his death, what can be called the “journey to the Cross”

Now, when considering Jesus, and incidents in his life, *from the perspective of Christians*, an important presupposition must be kept in mind, a distinction that is always made. Christians believe Jesus to be the God-man, that is to say, *fully God and fully human*. It took a few centuries, by the way, for the Christian community to situate this intellectually – which does not mean, of course, that it is fully explained. It remains a mystery, and the work of theology is not that of proving it, but of showing intellectually that it is not impossible.

And so, when considering the “Agony in the garden”, as we call it, there needs to be two “levels” of consideration. In other words, two questions need to be asked:

1. What is Jesus experiencing *humanly*, i.e. “as human”?
2. What is Jesus experiencing *divinely*, i.e. “as God”?

Allow me to include the incident here, taken from the gospel of Mark (14:32-42)

Then they came to a place named Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took with him Peter, James, and John, and began to be troubled and distressed. Then he said to them, "My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch." He advanced a little and fell to the ground and prayed that if it were possible the hour might pass by him; he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will." When he returned he found them asleep. He said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." Withdrawing again, he prayed, saying the same thing. Then he returned once more and found them asleep, for they could not keep their eyes open and did not know what to answer him. He returned a third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough. The hour has come. Behold, the Son of Man is to be handed over to sinners. Rise, let us go. Behold, my betrayer is at hand."

Humanly speaking, one can surmise that Jesus was experiencing fear or sadness. Such emotional responses are rather normal. But, if one *really* reads the passage, in other words, if one intuits between the lines, one can begin to sense that something more than simply emotional is happening. Because of the oneness of the person of Jesus as the God-man, while *fully* experiencing rich emotion (for emotion is part of human reality, of human experience), it is believed that the divine always has the last word. And if God is love – as is revealed in so many words in the Jewish Scriptures, and explicitly stated in the New Testament (I John 4:8) – then this means that, in life of Jesus, love always has the last word.

If such is true, then the agony is indeed deeper than simple fear or sadness. In fact, love “overrides” them both. At a deeper level, Jesus does not fear death, but – as strange as it may sound – wants to go that route because it is the gift of himself in love. Indeed, as was prophesied by the prophet Isaiah (52:13-53:12), in the poem of the suffering servant, the Messiah would die so as to bring salvation, that is to say, to traverse death, and thus empty it (so to speak), so that death no longer be an obstacle to love. The cup symbolizes the suffering and death that he knows await him. Why does Jesus request that the cup be taken away, when (as revealed in previous conversations) he has already embraced it, and, in fact, desires it (again, for the sake of what it will accomplish: the supreme pouring forth of divine love)?

In this light, early Christian thinkers indeed try to understand Jesus’ request that the cup to be taken away at a deeper, more spiritual level. The explanation can only be in relation to love. There must be a *loving* reason that he makes the request. Jesus knows that others who are bound to him in love – most notable Mary, his mother – will suffer in association with him. It has been suggested that his initial human reaction to this is to request that it not happen. And yet, he knows that something greater will happen if they are associated to this mysterious “pouring forth of divine love”, and so Jesus goes from “**Take this cup away from me**” to “**but not what I will but what you will**”.

I realize that this may sound totally strange or far-fetched. I hope that it makes some sense! I will work on your other questions, and send my thoughts along...