

Historical evidence proves Christ existed

by Bishop Victor Galeone

The following appeared as a Guest Column in the St. Augustine Record of Sunday, January 9, 2011. It was written in response to a piece that appeared the previous week, which denied that Jesus had ever existed.

– Bishop Galeone

In the Jan. 2 guest column, “Historical evidence lacking to prove Christ's existence,” Allan Marcil, asserts that “the Romans, notoriously meticulous record keepers, have no documentation” either of Jesus or of his crucifixion.

For starters, consider Tacitus who around 115 describes the fire that destroyed Rome in the year 64. To squelch the rumors that he started the fire, the Emperor Nero tried to pin the blame on “those whom the people call Cristiani. The leader of this sect - Christus - was condemned to death by Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius. This deadly superstition broke out in Judea, and then made its way to Rome, where all shameful things wind up...” (Annales XV, 44)

Then, there is the famous letter of Pliny the Younger to the Emperor Trajan written around 112. He informs the emperor that in the province he governs there are many Christians, who were “accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing hymns to a certain Cristus as if he were a god.” (Epist. X, 96)

Marcil - without giving reasons - discards scripture as a possible source for historical evidence. Like me, I'm sure that he believes that Lincoln, our 16th president, served during the Civil War, that he was shot in Ford's Theater on Good Friday 1865 and died the next day. These facts, drawn from reliable witnesses, were incorporated into our history books. The key component is “reliable witnesses.”

Limiting ourselves to the four gospel narratives, can we be certain that their authors used reliable witnesses for their accounts? To learn the answer, let's examine some of the internal evidence.

Trustworthy historians show the warts as well as the good side of a person's character. Wouldn't we suspect an historian's objectivity if he reported only how strong the economy was under President Bill Clinton while overlooking his affair with Monica Lewinski and his impeachment trial?

Let's apply that to the gospels. The apostles often come across as petty, slow learners. The night that Jesus was arrested, they deserted him, while Simon Peter cursed and swore that he had never laid eyes on the man. Talk about warts!

On the morning of the resurrection, where were the “macho” disciples? Hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish authorities. And where were the women, the so-called weaker sex? On the way to the tomb to finish embalming the body. If the disciples had fabricated the resurrection account, why would they include such embarrassing details? To those who would say that the entire resurrection account is pure fiction, I quote an early church father, John Chrysostom (d. 407): “How do you account for the fact that these men, who deserted and denied Christ during his lifetime, set out to win the whole world for him after his death? Did they perhaps say to themselves, ‘He could not save himself while he was alive, but now that he is dead, he will extend a helping hand to us.’? It is evident, then, that if they had not seen him risen from the dead and had proof of his power, they would never have risked so much - including their own lives.”

The testimony of Saul, AKA Paul, is especially powerful. St. Paul had never laid eyes on Jesus before his death on the cross. Yet one minute he's persecuting Christians, and the next, Paul becomes one of

them and is baptized, insisting that the risen Christ had appeared to him. That would be equivalent to Hitler - in the midst of the Holocaust - converting to Judaism and having himself circumcised, asserting that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had appeared to him!

Since Marcil energetically endorses the work of science, I close with a quote from the greatest scientific mind of the last century, Albert Einstein: "As a child, I received instruction both in the Bible and the Talmud. I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene. No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life."

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