

THE OPERA "JESUS CHRIST, SUPERSTAR"

by J. Ma. Cavanna, C.M.

I wish to begin this critical study with the words of the Apostle of the Gentiles:

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel — not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed. Am I now seeking the favour of men, or of God? Or am I trying to to please men? If I were still pleasing men, I should not be a servant of Christ.

For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1, 6-12), "who is God over all, blessed for ever" (Rom. 9, 5), "who though He was by nature God . . . emptied Himself, taking the nature of a slave, being made like unto men" (Phil. 2, 6-7), "one tried as we are in all things, except sin" (Hebr. 4, 15): "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Hebr. 13, 8)

The readers will excuse me if mention is made here of "anathemas", a word which does not please modern ears. As we say in the Liturgy of the Word, "this is the word of God", I cannot change it.

The above words make the best preamble to this study. I know that many will certainly disagree, at least at the beginning, with my contentions. I wish to make it clear from the start, that I do not speak here with the authority of a doctor of theology or of a biblical scholar. I do not have indeed any such titles. What I will say cannot have other values than the reasons supporting it. With those who might dissent I would welcome a friendly dialogue (no polemic, please!), unless they prefer to give a contemptuous brush-off to this study which could prove an easier though less worthy way to solve the problem.

My purpose is to bring some light and offer some criteria to dispel the mess produced by the controversial opera of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. I know that for writing this article some people will classify me as a "narrow-minded conservative". I care little for facile slogans or cheap labels. I am *not seeking the favour of men nor I am trying to please them*, if that would hinder me to remain a *servant of Christ, "my Lord and my God"* (Jn. 20, 28). So let us go at our subject.

We read in an American weekly:¹

"The controversy over the 87-minute rock-opera Jesus Christ, Superstar continues unabated. During last Holy Week, St. Louis' John Joseph Cardinal Carberry termed the rock-opera "distressing." "Theologically they (the authors) place Our Blessed Lord in a purely humanistic role." Fr. Joseph M. O'Brien, however, vigorously defended the Archdiocese of St. Louis' Radio and Television Office's judgment that the rock-opera was "not blasphemous" and was ever "uplifting", quoting a Scripture scholar at the diocesan seminary who lauded the work as "a spiritual experience." The Episcopal Bishop of the Western New York Episcopal Diocese included excerpts from the rock-opera during his Cathedral's Three-Hour Good Friday Service. Episcopalian columnist Rev. Lester Kinsolving, noted advocate of liberalized abortion reform, took full advantage of Jesus Christ, Superstar "being played on Vatican Radio — just as it was being played in churches throughout the United

¹ James Likoudis-Neil Stafford, *The Gospel according to Judas*; ap. THE WANDERER, July 8, 1971, p. 5.

States." This was adequate proof to Rev. Kinsolving that: "It is not irreverent. It is immensely moving... eloquently serious... thoroughly sincere and respectful... a legitimate effort."

And it is well known that many Catholic educators are presenting this rock-opera in religion and music classes of Catholic institutions.² Here in the Philippines we know the case of the same opera being produced last Christmas by the Dramatic Guild of a renowned Catholic School of girls with the assistance of the Junior Schola Cantorum of the *Diocesan College Seminary*. And we have read in the papers enthusiastic articles of priests, diocesan and religious, commending "*Superstar*" because it "restores the dramatic art to its original mission, which is to plumb the depths of religious meaning", and because "the Christ of this opera is not Christ the King, or Christ God, or the Christ preached by priests and ministers . . . but the Christ of the masses, etc." This is what some Catholic priests write. I need not mention the enthusiasm of some — if not many . . . — of our good religious Sisters . . .

This amazing confusion is what prompted me to devote some time to decipher the puzzling enigma behind it. Because I cannot think that the root of such jumble among our good Catholics is any real loss of faith, and much less any ill intention "to pervert the gospel of Christ" as in the days of St. Paul. And so we are far from intending any curse or anathema, not even against the authors of the opera, since Webber himself openly declared: "*We're not trying to pull people's belief away*".³ But I unhesitatingly do condemn and execrate the opera itself as a work that "perverts the gospel of Christ"; and this is what I intend to prove.

The composer Webber frankly acknowledged: "*I, personally, don't think that Jesus is God.*"⁴ Thus we should not wonder that his opera presents Christ "as just a man". It is not exact to say "in Webber and Rice's defense that in writing this opera, they simply wished to remain within the bounds

² cf. LIGUORIAN, May 1971, p. 53; THE WANDERER, July 1, 1971, p. 5

³ cf. HI-TIME-AWAKE, 3-12-71, p. 7

⁴ *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

of a vision of Christ *as a man*."⁵ Here lies the roo of the confusion. The theme of the whole opera is centered on the line spoken there by Magdalen and Judas: "*He is a man, he's just a man.*" The statement has two affirmations; the first is *true*; the second is a *blasphemy*. And yet the truth and the blasphemy are combined in one single sentence! That's the sophistry that has deluded so many people.

Still more; to make plain that sophistry we should examine the context. The very words put by the opera in the mouth of Magdalen and of Judas reveal that even the first part which, in itself, is true, "*He is a man*", taken in its context becomes *false*, because it is given the same meaning of the second *blasphemous* part: "*He's just a man*". Magdalen explains thus what she affirmed: "*And I've had so many men before; in many ways he is just one more.*" This is not only blasphemous, but profane, intolerably abusive, irreverent and contemptuous language which has given ground to the general impression of the public audience about what a Manila newspaper called the Superstar's "affair with Mary Magdalen" (!) Judas on his part explains the text "*He's a man*" saying "*He's just a man. He's not a king — he's just the same as anyone I know . . .*"

That is the real message of the opera, and that is indeed its blunder! It is not true that the "play gives an insight into Jesus' humanity."⁶ As a matter of fact, the opera stresses Christ's humanity, but by *denying His divinity*. How can this Superstar Jesus be God—as our Christian gospel and faith presents Him—if he was *just a man*, "*just one more*", "*just the same as anyone*" else; nay, if he is a quite *poor and dubious* character, psychically unbalanced, *as a man*, such as the opera presents Him? Obviously, the Superstar of the opera is *not* the Christ of the Gospel; the opera is a "new" adulterated version of the Gospel; it is a *different gospel, another gospel*. The opera *preaches a gospel contrary to that which we have received*, and thus it fully deserves St. Paul's inspired words of "anathema": *let it be accursed!*

But here comes the baffling riddle: crowds of Catholic — not to mention, Protestant — laity and clergy who hold the

⁵ cf. Rev. Fr. Castor Fernández, C.M., *What's the buzz at CIC*; ap. THE FREEMAN, December 12, 1971, p. 6

⁶ *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

divinity of Christ as the rock bottom of all their belief applaud frantically at this most glamorous denial of their faith!

A music professor of St. John's on Long Island, U.S.A. makes this witty remark:⁷

" certainly don't challenge the right of an atheist to to publish such an opera — just as I would have every right to compose lyrics like, 'Let me ask you, Buddha-man — Who do you think you're gooder-than'. But I would be the most surprised person on Earth to learn that they were singing it in Buddhist monasteries! Or that my new rock opera, 'Dammit, Mohammed!' was being used to teach Mohammedanism to the youth of Moslem!"

And this is the cause of our wonder and amazement. The Webber and Rice's opera is used in our Catholic schools and even within the sacred precinct of Christian churches! . . . The less damaging explanation would be to attribute this absurdity to the gross shallowness of contemporary religious education; or to the contaminating influence of certain "progressive" theological lucubrations resuscitating today long outdated and condemned errors of "modernism"⁸; or finally, to the pervading spirit of secularization and desacralization that pollutes the very atmosphere of our society.

⁷ cf. Catherine N. Dillon, *Jesus Christ — Superstar?*; ap. THE WANDERER, July 1, 1971, p. 10

⁸ cf. Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolicarum*, Herder, 1965, nn.3427-3438

" . . . For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands. He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice, and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin." (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 22)