

## **A CROSS ACROSS 42<sup>ND</sup> STREET: PROCESSIONAL PERFORMANCE AS PEACEFUL PROTEST**

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On Friday, April 26, 2006, eighty to one hundred people gathered in New York City's Hammarckjold Plaza to participate in the yearly performance of Pax Christi's the Way of the Cross. Unlike conventional reenactments of the Gospel, this radically modern interpretation of the traditional Catholic procession maps the narrative of Christ's Passion onto the New York City landscape. Using three modes of performance—witnessing, speaking, and processing—the procession reinterprets the cultural significance of the city's modern landmarks to illustrate the ostensibly universal relevance of the ancient morality story. This paper evaluates how Pax Christi, as observed in 2006, utilized performative elements of this traditional ritual to address the major political and cultural conflicts seen to be facing the world that year, specifically, torture, discrimination and war.

Building on participant observation of the 2006 procession, this paper explores how Pax Christi uses the Way of the Cross to re-contextualize NYC landmarks to represent the Passion narrative. The overall goal of the paper is to ask how certain performative modes are employed to achieve transformative goals, and to what extent these goals are achieved. The paper is organized as follows: First, we will elucidate both the concept of performative modes and, following this, provide a brief background of the Pax Christi. From the background, we will examine how Pax Christi's Stations of the Cross employs performative modes of witnessing, addressing, and processing, in Stations I, III, IV, XI, and XIV.

### **PERFORMATIVE MODES**

This analysis uses the concept of performative modes to refer to three specific acts that were prominent in our observation. The categories of action that we identify are deeply rooted in Catholic tradition, and in this case study, were seen as the means where by the audience engaged the complexity and moral ambiguity of modern social dilemmas through a faith-based stance. These are a) the act of witnessing, b) the act of addressing, and c) the act of processing. To understand how these performative modes, as elements of traditional ritual, are used to achieve transformation, we will consider how they are applied to modern symbols to protest social and political injustices, while also functioning as a spiritual exercise for the individual participant.

### **BACKGROUND: PAX CHRISTI**

Founded in 1945, in response to World War II and the Holocaust, Pax Christi International is a lay organization of the Roman Catholic Church committed to peace and social justice. The founders included Pierre-Marie Théas, who, as Bishop of Montauban in the south of France, had been arrested at the start of the war for speaking out against deportation of the Jews, and Marthe Dortel-Claudot, a teacher seeking alternative ways to reconcile post-war Europe and prevent future acts of injustice. Today, Pax Christi International is composed of 60,000 members from fifty countries, uniting over sixty non-governmental

organizations around the world.<sup>1</sup> It defines itself as “a non-profit, non-governmental Catholic peace movement working on a global scale on a wide variety of issues in the fields of human rights, security and disarmament, economic justice and ecology” and it maintains a “consultative status” as an NGO at the United Nations.<sup>2</sup>

For the last twenty-five years on Good Friday, Pax Christi of Metro New York has led Catholics through the heart of Manhattan in a unique “visioning” of the Stations of the Cross. Their course begins in Hammarskjöld Plaza, near the United Nations, and proceeds along 42<sup>nd</sup> street through the heart of Times Square and ending on 9<sup>th</sup> avenue. The procession correlates the fourteen stations of the Passion narrative to individual NYC landmarks. Each landmark is selected for either directly or indirectly



Times Square

representing major world crisis. By identifying the landmark as representing a chapter of the biblical story, Pax Christi correlates the struggle Jesus faced to the moral struggles facing the world today. For example, the United States Armed Forces Recruiting Station self-evidently represents America’s armed forces, and by extension, our military presence in Iraq. In the Pax Christi procession, the recruiting station was selected to represent the ninth station: Jesus is Nailed to the Cross.

## THE WAY OF THE CROSS: RELIGION AS PERFORMANCE

The Stations of the Cross, otherwise known as the Way of the Cross, is composed of fourteen tableaux recounting the section of the Gospel, known as the Passion, which recounts Jesus’ condemnation, his walk to Golgotha, and his ultimate crucifixion. Originating in the late Renaissance,<sup>3</sup> the Stations of the Cross, like other processions it serves as a miniature pilgrimage, where atonement is achieved through visiting holy sites and receiving forgiveness from the representative saint. The chapters composing the Way of the Cross, known as stations, are metaphorical holy sites that, when combined, compose a spiritual map for the pious participant to follow.

How the Gospel story is performed across processions varies radically. Conventionally, the Way of the Cross is performed as literal reenactments of the Gospel, often complete with costumes, props, and livestock. Highly theatrical performances of the Passion—such as the 2008 World Youth Day performance, in Sydney, Australia, performed for 200,000 pilgrims and broadcast across the world—seek to create an experience of ancient Jerusalem for modern parishioners.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, rather than relying on mimicry

<sup>1</sup> “OUR MEMBERS,” *Pax Christi International*, May 14, 2008, [online] June 6, 2008, available at: <http://www.paxchristi.net/members/>.

<sup>2</sup> “ABOUT US >> HISTORY,” *Pax Christi International*, May 14, 2008, [online] June 6, 2008, available at: [http://www.paxchristi.net/international/eng/about\\_cont.php?wat=history](http://www.paxchristi.net/international/eng/about_cont.php?wat=history).

<sup>3</sup> George Cyprian Alston, “Way of the Cross,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 15 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), 6, as quoted in *New Advent*, Jun. 2008, [online] available at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15569a.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> ABC Television, “Compass,” 10 April 2009, [online] June 27, 2009, available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/compass/s2525844.htm>.

to affect a moral resonance with the audience, Pax Christi uses symbolic association, correlating New York's iconic landmarks to the iconic tableaux of the Passion narrative. The examples this paper will look at include: the UN as the First Station, "Jesus is Condemned;" Pfizer pharmaceutical headquarters as the Fourth Station, "Jesus Meets his Mother;" the United States Armed Forces Recruiting Station as the eleventh Station, "Jesus is Nailed to the Cross;" and Port Authority Bus Terminal as the fourteenth Station, "Jesus is Laid in his Tomb."

### WITNESSING

The first mode of performance that we will consider is the act of witnessing. For this, we go to the First Station, Dag Hammarskjold Plaza at the United Nations, where "Jesus is Condemned to Death." According to Pax Christi organizers, the U.N. was chosen because it represents the world's failure to eradicate human suffering.



Dag Hammarskjold Plaza at the United Nations

At every station, a pre-selected person read aloud a corresponding biblical passage. A short prayer followed, which in Catholic tradition, composed of a call and response format between the reader and the congregation. The scripted response assigned to the First Station was "Jesus, victim of torture, help us help all victims of torture." While a reflection of the biblical events, the prayer simultaneously located itself firmly in contemporary events calling on those present to pressure governmental bodies to cease torture practices. The response, then, can be further seen

as an invocation of the assembly as American citizens—as perpetrators of crimes of torture by political association—to "pray for those who have been tortured in our name." The call to action according to this thinking was not only directed at the U.N., but to all the governments sitting in its assemblies.

As previously stated, each New York landmark was assigned a specific Gospel passage read by and individual or a group of participants, followed by a short homily, which correlated the popular significance of the landmark with the Gospel passage, thereby treating the civil monument as a spiritual call to action. As the procession moved from one site to another, the journey became a site for virtual tourism of current day suffering.



Simon Wiesenthal Tolerance Center

A powerful example of standing witness was Station III, "Jesus Falls the First Time." To represent the first fall, the procession paused outside the Simon Wiesenthal Tolerance Center. While the center stands as a monument for all suffering, it is better known as a memorial for the singular Jewish experience of the Holocaust. After the Gospel passage was read, the homily called for all people to stand witness to all victims of "discrimination, particularly against Middle

Eastern people.” This moment not only invoked the Holocaust, but the centuries of Catholic persecution of the Jewish people, the sixty year old Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and America’s current occupation of Iraq. Through the flexibility of symbolic language, religious and national and historical boundaries were dissolved. Stating that modern people’s suffering is equivalent to the suffering of Jesus, the participant’s commitment to their faith—as a call to stand witness for the sufferings of Jesus—becomes an act of standing witness for the suffering of all people.

### ADDRESSING

The second significant performative mode employed by Pax Christi is the act of addressing, which we will here evaluate as a performative speech act, a term originally coined by J. L. Austin, a linguistics professor.<sup>5</sup> Historically, the Catholic Church has elevated the spoken over the printed word. In the fifteenth century increasingly influential reformists argued that the Church had maintained power in the hands of priests and bishops by denying the general public access to printed copies of the bible in the local language. The Reformation, which opened the door to the formation of new protestant religions, saw a return to the primacy of the written word of God as the cornerstone of faith, adding to the Lutheran argument that no priest or clergy ought to mediate one’s relationship with god. While Catholics revere the Bible as a divine realization, emphasis has historically and continues to be placed on the spoken word, the profession of faith, and more specifically, the performative speech act as a way of communicating ones relationship with God through religious addresses.

For Austin the performative speech act is a separate category of language where the truth of a statement is held in the act of speaking, as recognized by those witnessing the event, rather than by external evidence of truth. For example, at a wedding ceremony the act of saying “I do,” coupled by the recognition of the witnesses of the validity of the statement, becomes the act that marries a couple.<sup>6</sup> In *The Time That Remains*, philosopher Giorgio Agamben has drawn a similar conclusion arguing that the act of speaking in prayer makes real the truth of faith by proclaiming and demonstrating faith in a shared capacity.<sup>7</sup> The truth of a performative speech act, then, is not grounded in the observable or measurable world, but in the agreed validity of the speaker’s intention.

Pax Christi’s use of language as action was particularly poignant at Station Four, “Jesus Meets his Mother,” located at Pfizer pharmaceutical headquarters. Here, on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and Second Avenue, the reflections asked those in attendance to pray for those suffering from AIDS, and to join in singing,

Who will speak for the ones who are voiceless? Speak the truth in the places of power?  
 Who will speak so their voice will be heard? Oh, who will speak if we don’t?  
 Who will speak for the shunned and the outcast? Will speak for the people with AIDS?  
 Will speak so their voice will be heard? Oh, who will speak if we don’t?<sup>8</sup>

By recognizing Pfizer as a key player in the fight against AIDS (despite their withholding drugs

<sup>5</sup> J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Austin, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 131-134.

<sup>8</sup> Marty Haugen. *Who Will Speak? Celebration Series.* (Chicago: GIA/Les Presses de Taize, 1993).

necessary to preventing the spread of infectious disease in impoverished countries) through direct address, those in the street assembly called upon themselves to reflect on their positioning and subsequent inaction, as members of a privileged society, to respond to moral wrongs.

## PROCESSION

The act of processing, or ceremonial walking from one designated space to another, is central to the narrative of the passion. Through the act of walking, processions mark civil spaces and people as sacred. Procession, as a form of environmental theater, incorporated the people and architecture of New York City into Pax Christi's performance of the Stations of the Cross. By walking through the streets of NYC, and observing the events of the story, the participants become actors taking on the character of Jesus. However, we, as participant-observers were faced with the question, if the purpose of this Pax Christi ritual was to draw the city, its people and places, into a sort of time bending proclamation of shared suffering, who was the audience? If the participants were the actors and the city was brought into the performative space the stations created, who served as the audience?



42nd Street

A procession is ostensibly performed outside of the church, as a means of marking the civil realm as sacred. Throughout the procession, ambassadors of Pax Christi handed out flyers to passers-by that stated, "We are praying the Stations of the Cross not in a church, but here on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, in order to recall that Jesus' Way of the Cross was a public event." Following from this, it became apparent that the public on 42<sup>nd</sup> became an audience for the procession. The act of pausing to observe the event, being situated within a performance that attempted to co-opt the cityscape into a particular

system of meaning rendered those who felt outside of the event as the audience. During the procession, we observed a number of different reactions. Some showed frustration that the group was blocking their way to work, others paused and watched in contemplation. One woman, rushing into the Pfizer Building, even expressed frustration that she forgot to go to church that morning. As the processors performed the central events that lead to the crucifixion of Jesus, the unintentional effect was to create a performative space the wrenched people out of their familiar routine and the context it is habitually couched in. This interruption of the familiar within the everyday was not lost on the participants. Father Ryan of the Paulist Fathers argued,

"Those going on their own normal working day, their responsibilities in Manhattan, it's very clear who's in and who's not... And this is a public event. That's the first thing that really feels so right to me about it, is that it makes this procession of the cross very real to the people on the street, as it was when Jesus made his way down the Via Dolorosa...you have to realize that when this happened it was just another day in the life of these people."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Father Tom Ryan April 4th, 2007. Conducted by T. Good.

The incorporating of environmental factors, people and places into an act of storytelling is the essence of environmental theater. The Good Friday procession simultaneously dissolves conceptions of temporal and geographic boundaries while dismantling traditional definitions of actor and audience.

As we have seen, the articulation of faith through symbolically constructed language engages the temporal symbolism of the city's architecture. Catherine Bell describes this process by arguing that "... ritual is to the symbols it dramatizes as action is to thought; on a second level, ritual integrates through an action; and on a third level, a focus on ritual performance integrates our thoughts and their actions."<sup>10</sup> The liminal nature of the procession allowed the congregation to assume mixed identities, whereby the voluntary taking on of pain, both literal and metaphoric through ritual creates a space for spiritual and civil transformation.

The Pax Christi procession, as a performative mode, utilized elements of environmental theater in a number of ways. Above we saw how NYC pedestrians were incorporated into the storytelling process, next we will consider how the physical landmarks of the New York's cityscape were co-opted to bring the Biblical story to life. Out of the numerous landmarks Pax Christi selected to represent a moment of the biblical story, the most politically pertinent was certainly selecting Times Square, and more specifically, Armed Forces Recruiting Station, to perform Station Eleven, "Jesus is Nailed to the Cross."

As the group entered Times Square a feeling of tense anticipation emerged in the crowd. If there had been any sense of lassitude previously, it was now replaced with a clear sense of purpose. This was the pinnacle of the procession, the central reason most of the people had come; to protest the war in Iraq outside the busiest recruiting station in the country.

Representative of the post-industrial era, Times Square is saturated with secular meaning and a religious procession entering this space is like David in the lion's den. With flashing advertisements and five-story television screens, this epicenter of modernity reflects the multi-dimensional Janus face of contemporary America. Just as Jerusalem was a nucleus in the vast network of trade routes connecting the East and West in ancient times, New York City—and particularly Times Square—represent the crossroads of modern life. Standing in the center of Times Square one can experience the ultimate "world gathering," both a seeing of the world through vast amounts of imagery and information that channels through the space, and a being seen by the world. In this context the group, now numbering around 150, arrived under police escort, to stand on the corner of 44<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway and pray.

Station XI, "Jesus is Nailed to the Cross," was positioned directly in front of the Armed Forces Recruiting Station, with the designated theme, "Our Society is Nailed to the Cross of Militarization." Father Ryan vociferously read the reflection:

We stand here at the Times Square recruiting station, the busiest recruiting station in the nation, in a nation that spends the most on the military. This spending crucifies our society. It steals from education. It steals from health care. It steals from the environment. It steals from life. Militarism steals our youth who succumb to the lie of redemptive violence. It has killed tens of thousands in the war in Iraq in the war on terrorism and promises to kill more. As the elite sit comfortably, shrapnel rips through the flesh of the poor and innocent, in our name, just as the

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 32.

nails ripped through Jesus' flesh 2,000 years ago. The killing must stop. This recruiting center is a lie. It represents liars and the prince of lies. Violence is a lie. Militarism is a lie. We stand here today in front of this place to say, "no more killing, no more lies.

The response: God of peace, forgive us"

For the lies of our government done in our name, we pray... (Response)

For the victims of war, soldiers and civilians, who die for American imperialism, we pray... (response)

For the complicity and apathy while thousands die half a world away so we can maintain an avaricious, gluttonous way of life, we pray...(response)

For our inability to act with justice, to put our own comfort and our own bodies on the line in acts of civil disobedience during a time of war, we pray...(response)"

For our slavery and addiction to our own fear while others die and wallow in prisons in our name, we pray."



Times Square



## LIMINALITY, MEMORY, AND TRANSFORMATION

The goal of Pax Christi's Way of the Cross is two-fold. First, it seeks to address and transform the social and political structure of contemporary society. Second, it seeks to transform analogous spiritual conflicts by addressing social conflicts.



Times Square

To achieve these goals, however, Pax Christi first must make use of important though subtle performative tropes and methods. First it makes use of what theorists call the liminal nature of ritual. Liminality is a transition phase, a physical or temporal space where a thing is both its former self and the thing that it is becoming. Based on the Christ figure, which is argued to be an archetype of liminal existence (both God and man), the Stations of the Cross creates a space for participants to transform themselves and the world around them. The anthropologist Victor Turner described

liminality as the “paradox of being both this and that.”<sup>11</sup> For this reason, he sees liminality as an essential component both to ritual and to religion as a whole. Christians consider the person of Jesus to have been dual by nature, fully man and fully divine, making him an ultimately liminal character. As the center of the Christian faith, Jesus' liminality is a vehicle for Christians to understand the nature of God. The figure of Jesus Christ, as a symbol, can be embodied and performed through ritual as a way to understand the duality of life.

However, Pax Christi is not simply living in the past, using rituals rooted to previous times. Rather the march re-focuses the transformational power of ritual on current conflicts by appearing to be both a procession and the more modern phenomenon of the civil parade. Meshing the two traditions together, Pax Christi allows for a sort of cultural transference to occur that makes the message of the procession timeless. Processional performances, such as the Way of the Cross, are a way for societies to transmit cultural memory, religious or secular, across generations. According to professor of performance studies Richard Schechner, rituals serve as “...a way people remember. Rituals are memories in action, encoded into actions. Rituals also help people deal with difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies, and desires that trouble, exceed or violate the normal or daily life.”<sup>12</sup> In short, ritual transforms memory into actions that can be learned and passed on. Pax Christi's Stations of the Cross combines the traditional use of the Catholic procession as a mode of transmitting religious knowledge with its modern-secular incarnation: the parade.

Mark Sussman, a professor of performance studies, has defined the parade as a procession, a choreographed event representing sacred beliefs through commemoration, while also sending clear

<sup>11</sup> Victor Witter Turner and Edith L. B. Turner, *Blazing the Trail: Way Marks in the Exploration of Symbols* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 49.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2 ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 45.

messages of patriotism.<sup>13</sup> By placing the sacred story of the Gospel in the secular landscape, the procession has a further liminal function: it simultaneously becomes a religious *and* patriotic act. In attaching religious allegories to modern landmarks, the procession engages both the spiritual and civic responsibility of the participant. By reputedly worldly actions of industry and nation-states through prayer, the procession blurs boundaries between the participant's identities as Catholic and as citizen.

Using the performative modes of addressing, witnessing and processing, the procession actively blurs normative lines dividing sacred and secular space, a blurring which is then replicated in Pax Christi's reflection of the presence of spiritual consciousness within the modern identity.

### THE TOURIST EXPERIENCE: HOW MEANING IS MADE

Anthropologist Dean MacCannell's has argued that tourism is a performance of social and political definition. In *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* MacCannell evaluates tourist attractions as cultural experiences composed of three structural elements. First, there is the mode, or model, which is the embodiment of an ideal. The second is the influence, which is how "the experience is changed, created, an intensified belief or feeling that is based on the model."<sup>14</sup> The third component is the medium, "an agency that connects a model and its influence."<sup>15</sup> For our purposes, we would like to argue that Pax Christi serves as the medium through which an audience engages in a dialogue between an idealized religious and secular model.

MacCannell's articulation of the mediated influence of the model demonstrates the potentially subversive power of an affective engagement with the "other." Working from the reality of a globalized world, and the understanding of New York City as an epicenter of the globalizing force, Pax Christi forced those in attendance to vividly see the war in their proverbial own back yard. Using MacCannell's three components of cultural productions—model, influence and medium—as a theoretical structure helps clarify the performative value of the eleventh station of the cross. The model was the Recruiting Station, which simultaneously represented the American military and the Roman's as they nailed Jesus to the cross. The medium was the ritual structure of the Way of the Cross that connected the spiritual meanings traditionally associated with the Passion narrative to the New York landmarks as cultural icons. The influence, or intensified feeling, resulted from the performative elements of processing, addressing, standing witness, where the meanings of the medium, in this case the Recruiting Station as a vehicle of war, are placed in a spiritual context through the medium of ritual.

However, the question remains: to what extent was the procession successful? And, perhaps more interesting, does Pax Christi translate a spiritual transformation into social action? The final station clearly aimed to address this last question. "Jesus is laid in the Tomb" outside of the Port Authority Bus Terminal was the stage at which parishioners were asked to reflect on how to go forth in the world as "disciples of Christ." For this station, a small performance was arranged where one member of the procession dressed in a comical Roman costume, raised a plastic sword over his head and called to the crowd, "Onward Christian soldiers!" Next, a woman dressed in an angel costume, got up and began to

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Sussman, "Celebrating the New World Order: Festival and War in New York," *The Drama Review*, 39:2 (1995): 150.

<sup>14</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 23-24.

<sup>15</sup> MacCannell, 24.

chastise him for his behaviour. Another woman, dressed as a devil, stood on his other side, encouraging him to carry-on. This iconic image of having an angel and devil on each shoulder represented the challenge that participants faced in carrying a message of faith into the secular world, warned of the dangers inherent in acting for one's self rather than out of a sense of service to others.

Pax Christi defined success as a joint spiritual and civil transformation; that the participant's faith and view of world conflicts combine to re-enforce a personal commitment to God and the world. It would be easy to qualify success in terms of actions performed as direct result of the procession. Did the participants leave the procession to work at a food kitchen? Or did they return to their comfy New York apartment, content that they did their part? But to use quantitative data such as this would confuse the nature and effect of the performance. As Austin distinguished concerning performative speech acts, the validity of a performance is not proved by the events they produce, but in the validity of the performance itself. How, then, to evaluate the success or failure of Pax Christi's Stations of the Cross? Seen through the lens of subversive yet effective and positive performance, Pax Christi was successful in correlating spiritual and civil symbols and inspiring a reevaluation of their respective meanings—in turn eliciting an emotional response on the part of the participant which creates the possibility for different behavior. By co-opting New York City's iconic landmarks into a performative retelling of the biblical story, Pax Christi blurred boundaries and classifications of "religious" versus "secular," creating a liminal space of transformation. Rather than designating individual bodies to perform the mystery of faith, Pax Christi's Way of the Cross utilized the three performative elements of witnessing, addressing, and processing, to incorporate groups of people from all over the world to reflect upon the moral underpinnings of the Gospel chapters and apply them to contemporary events. From the inmates of Guantanamo Bay, to American soldiers fighting in Iraq, to the NYC pedestrian passing us by on the street, the members of the procession actively stood witness, de facto participants in a larger religious act. As a mode of social agency through traditional religious form, Pax Christi created an interactive experience in which participants associated the spiritual past and social present with an eye to constructing a peaceful future.

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