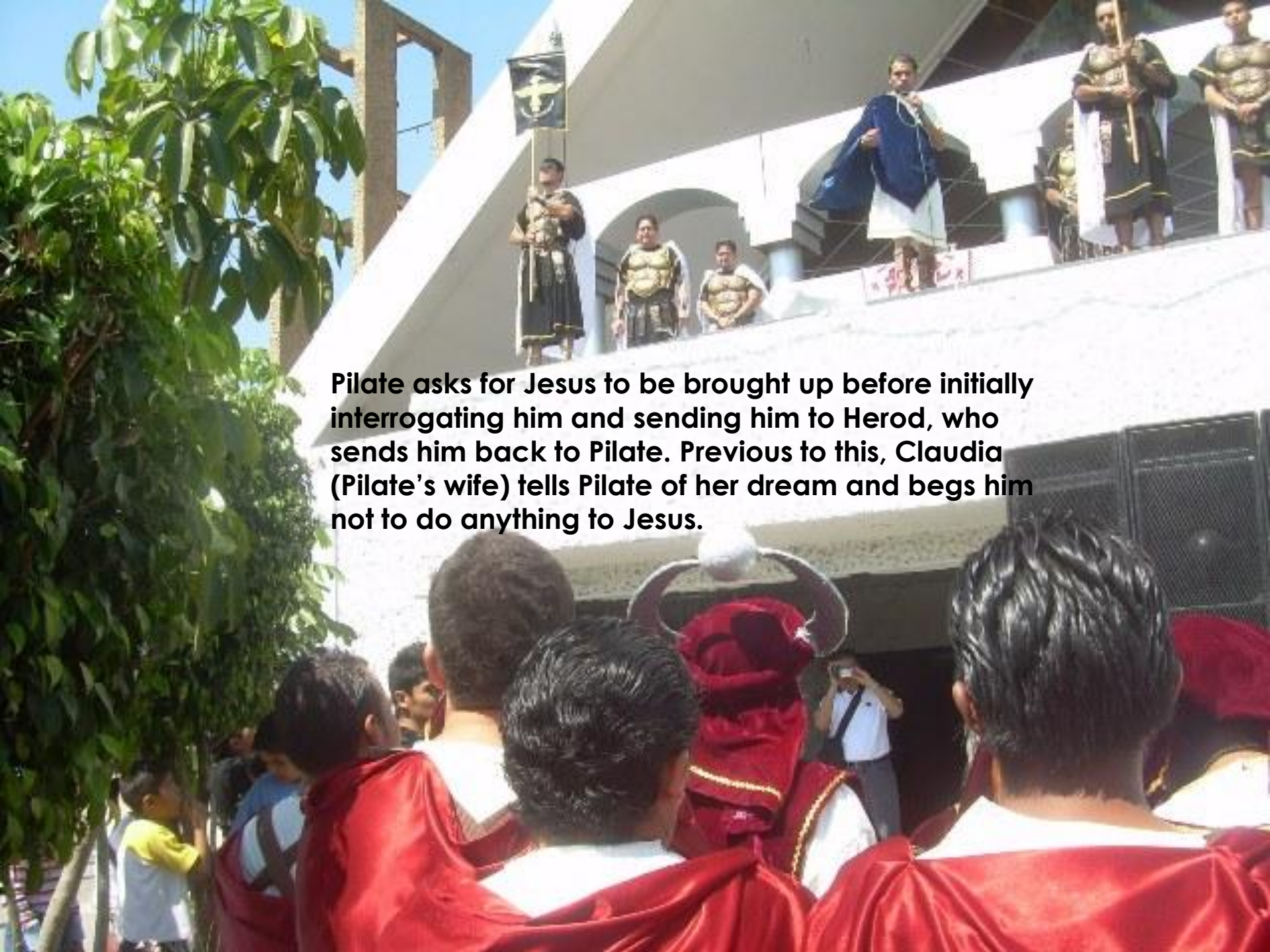
MEXICAN PASSION PLAY 2008

Every year on Thursday and Friday of Holy Week, Passion Plays staged by local Roman Catholic Churches are held in the majority of cities, towns, and villages throughout Mexico. The largest one (shown here) is in the Iztapalapa area of southern Mexico City—this year the attendance there was 600,000 people for the Thursday evening part of the Passion Play (Last Supper and Jesus' arrest) and 1,500,000 for the Friday part (Jesus' passion, trial, and crucifixion). Smaller representations take place in many different neighborhoods throughout Mexico City, and this year I attended the one put on by a church near our house.

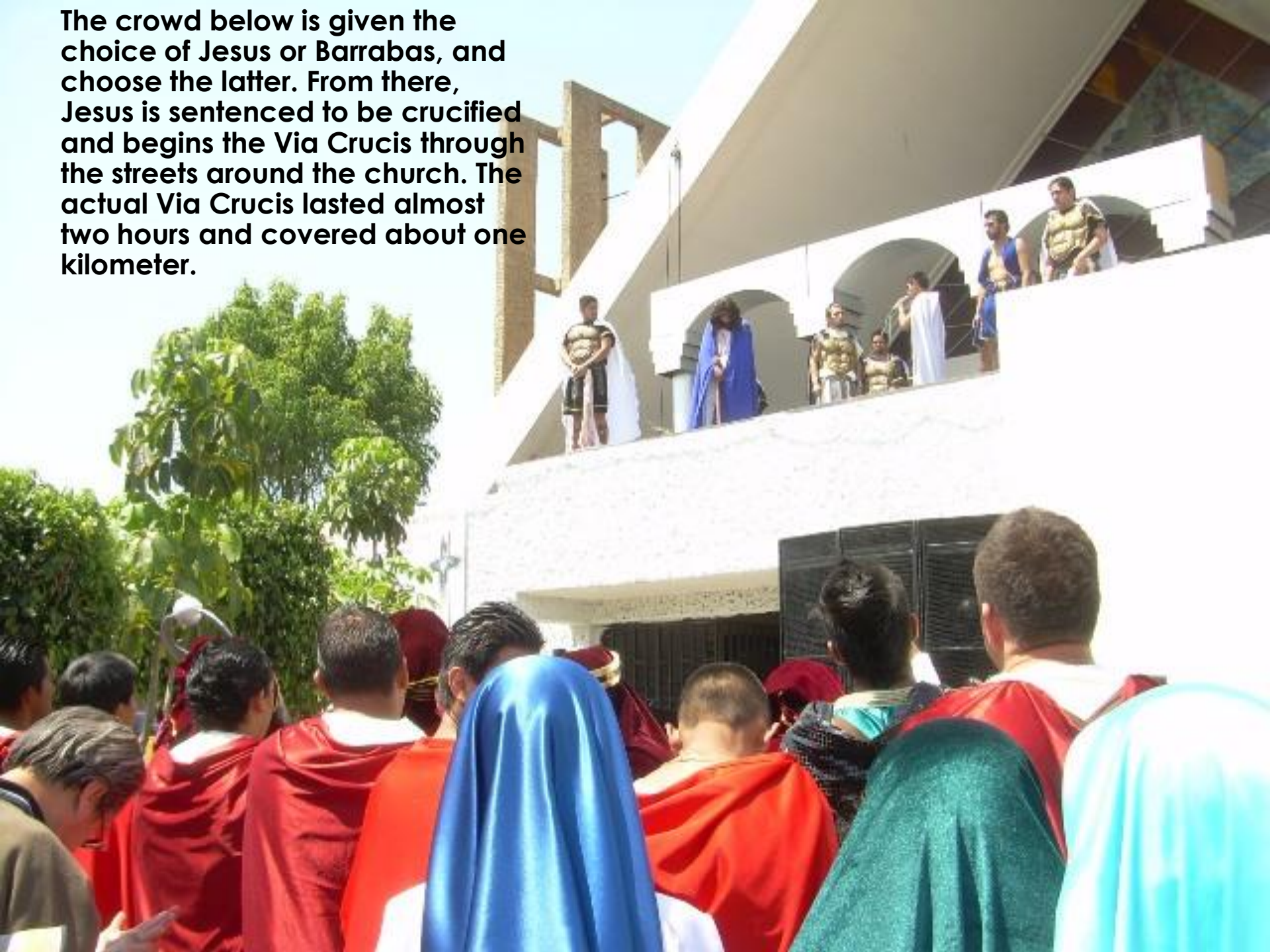
The Friday part of the play began at 11:00 a.m., with Jesus being led before Pilate, followed by Caiphas and the Jewish chief priests. The person who plays the part of Jesus usually changes from one year to the next, and the one chosen often prepares for the play a whole year in advance, letting his hair and beard grow and carrying out various spiritual exercises during the year.

The priests present Jesus before Pilate, clamoring for Pilate to crucify him. Throughout the play, Jesus is extremely passive, head constantly bowed, resigned to his fate.



Pilate asks for Jesus to be brought up before initially interrogating him and sending him to Herod, who sends him back to Pilate. Previous to this, Claudia (Pilate's wife) tells Pilate of her dream and begs him not to do anything to Jesus.

Jesus is flogged (here and elsewhere with cotton strands like those used in mops, tinged with red paint to look like blood), and then mocked by the soldiers after they place a crown of thorns on his head—all of this, of course, without actually hurting the actor playing Jesus.

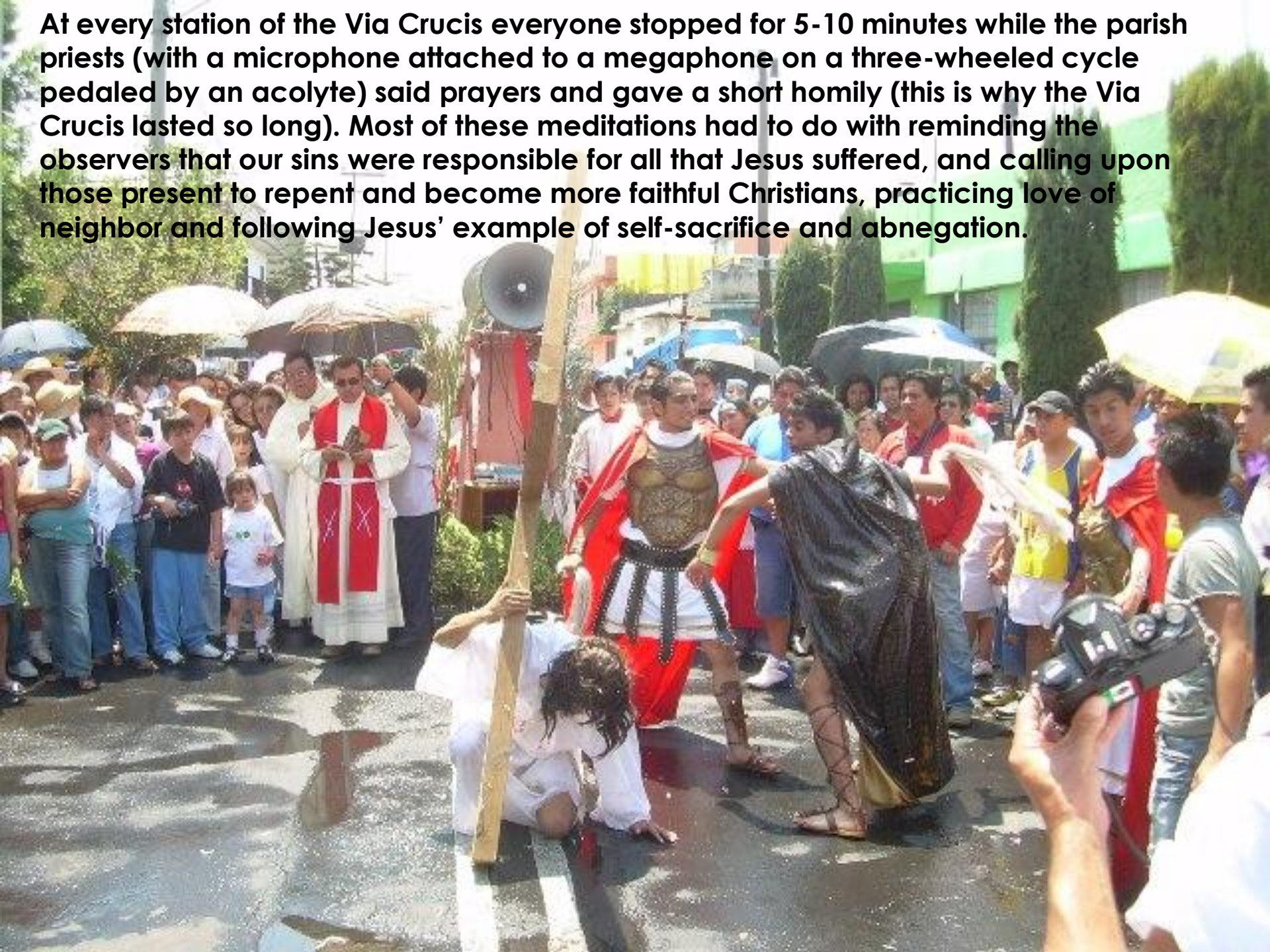


The crowd below is given the choice of Jesus or Barrabas, and choose the latter. From there, Jesus is sentenced to be crucified and begins the Via Crucis through the streets around the church. The actual Via Crucis lasted almost two hours and covered about one kilometer.

While cars and the metro go by in the background (the police blocked off part of the busy avenue), the crowd of observers slowly grows in number. By the end of the Via Crucis, its size was at least three times what it is here.

Jesus was constantly being whipped, and wincing in agony. A few hours later, however, I saw "Jesus" dressed in street clothes and he was perfectly fine. Nevertheless, the impression on the observers was strong, as all seemed to wince with Jesus and feel his pain. This seemed to be one of the main objectives of the play, which continually stressed the enormity of Jesus' suffering.

The people in the neighborhood “took pity” on Jesus, pouring water on his feet because the pavement was very hot. He wore sandals, while other actors went barefoot, but hardly anyone seemed to be concerned about wetting their feet—only those of Jesus. Then someone brought a water truck to wet the street in front of the procession (bottom left). The “thieves” to be crucified with Jesus follow him.

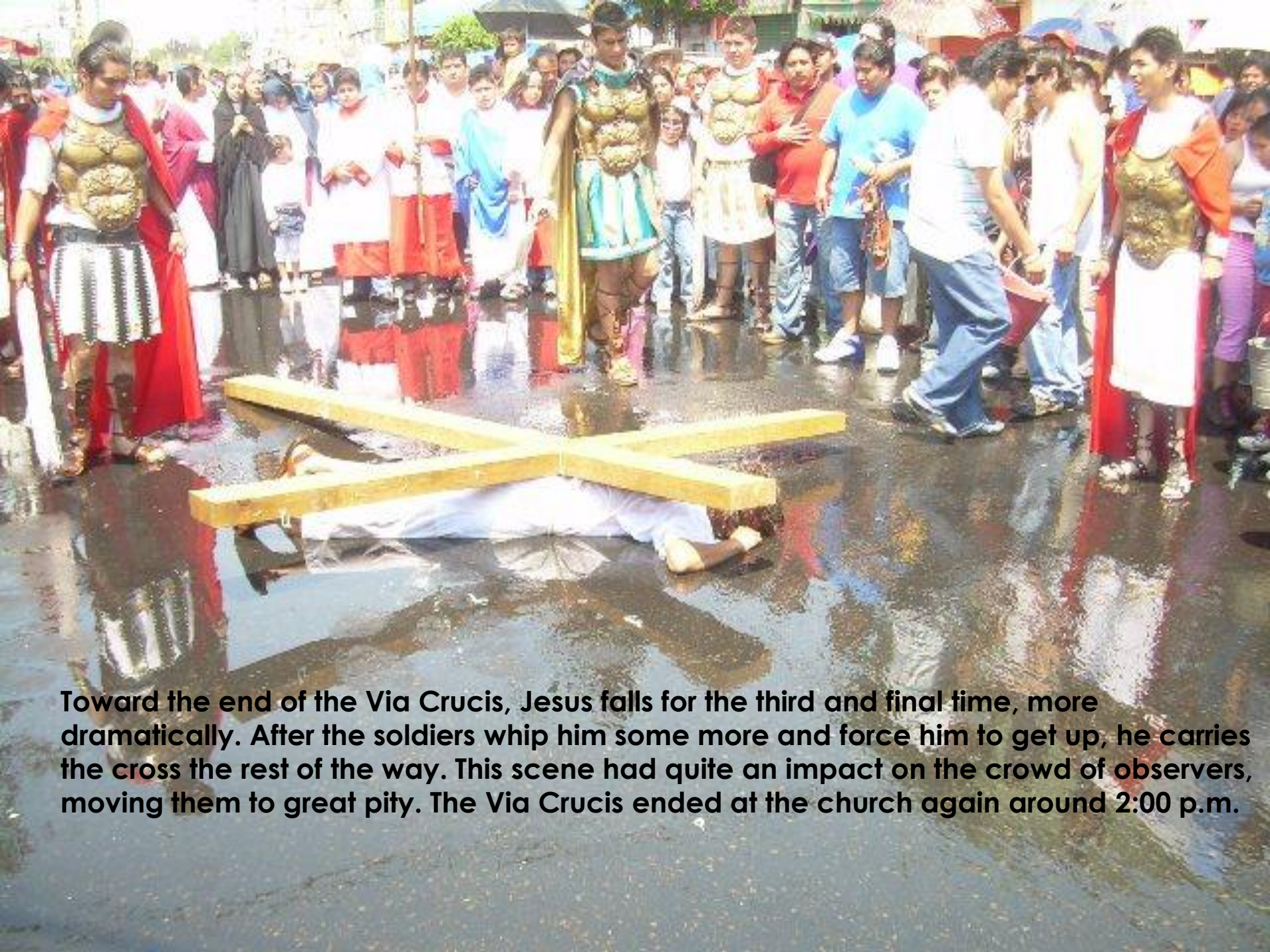


At every station of the Via Crucis everyone stopped for 5-10 minutes while the parish priests (with a microphone attached to a megaphone on a three-wheeled cycle pedaled by an acolyte) said prayers and gave a short homily (this is why the Via Crucis lasted so long). Most of these meditations had to do with reminding the observers that our sins were responsible for all that Jesus suffered, and calling upon those present to repent and become more faithful Christians, practicing love of neighbor and following Jesus' example of self-sacrifice and abnegation.

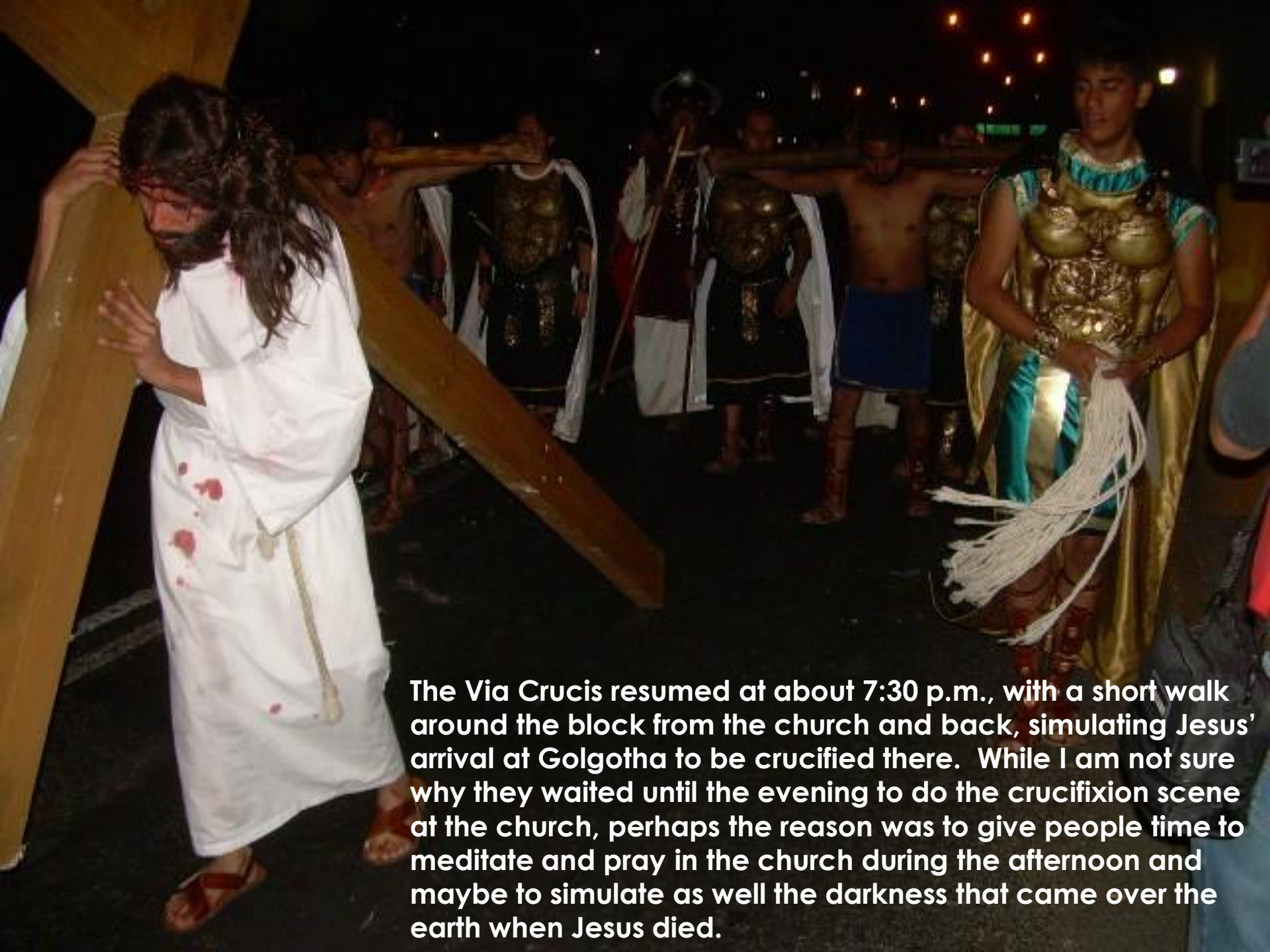
Simon of Cyrene carries the cross for Jesus (though later Jesus began to carry it again himself). While the "soldiers" tried to keep the people at a distance, many constantly drew near to Jesus and the other actors, so that the actors and the observers were mixed together in a single crowd throughout most of the procession. At one point, a young girl even went up to Jesus to offer him some water to drink as he was bent over in agony, but he refused.

The Passion Play included many of the later Christian traditions not found in the Bible. For example, Saint Veronica consoled Jesus, wiping his forehead with a cloth upon which an image of Jesus' holy face then miraculously appeared. At times, such as here, Jesus also spoke into the microphone—in this case, to tell the "daughters of Jerusalem" to weep for themselves rather than for him (Luke 23:27-31).

Throughout the Via Crucis, an angel led the way for Jesus. When Jesus fell, the angel went back to stand over Jesus in order to give him the strength necessary to continue.

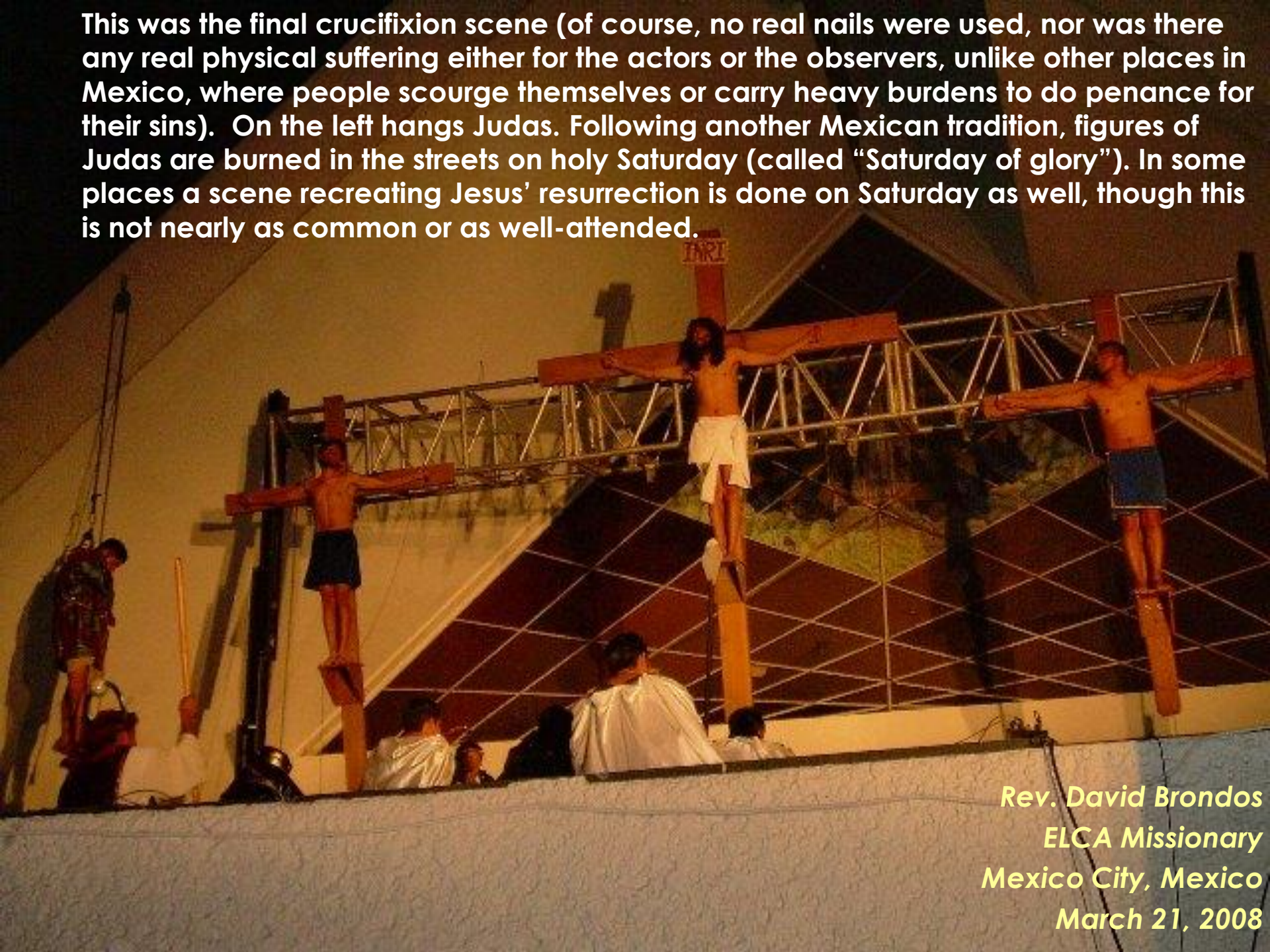


Toward the end of the Via Crucis, Jesus falls for the third and final time, more dramatically. After the soldiers whip him some more and force him to get up, he carries the cross the rest of the way. This scene had quite an impact on the crowd of observers, moving them to great pity. The Via Crucis ended at the church again around 2:00 p.m.



The Via Crucis resumed at about 7:30 p.m., with a short walk around the block from the church and back, simulating Jesus' arrival at Golgotha to be crucified there. While I am not sure why they waited until the evening to do the crucifixion scene at the church, perhaps the reason was to give people time to meditate and pray in the church during the afternoon and maybe to simulate as well the darkness that came over the earth when Jesus died.

This was the final crucifixion scene (of course, no real nails were used, nor was there any real physical suffering either for the actors or the observers, unlike other places in Mexico, where people scourge themselves or carry heavy burdens to do penance for their sins). On the left hangs Judas. Following another Mexican tradition, figures of Judas are burned in the streets on holy Saturday (called "Saturday of glory"). In some places a scene recreating Jesus' resurrection is done on Saturday as well, though this is not nearly as common or as well-attended.



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