

Stuff about Staffs, or Staves

A hierarch's symbols of office are many: the omophorion and panagia he wears, and the staff he carries. Our bishops have two styles of staffs. One is the *zhezl* (or crozier) and another is a *posokh* (or staff).

The *zhezl* is given to a bishop at his ordination to the episcopacy by the chief consecrator following the dismissal. *“Accept the crozier so that you may tend the flock of Christ entrusted to you, and be a staff and support for those who are obedient; use the staff to lead the disobedient and the wayward, the staff of compulsion, the staff of correction.”* These words harken back to early texts because many modern usages do not have these usages of the staff section. The 17th century author-canonist Agostinho Barbosa explains the staff's shape. “[T]he end is sharp and pointed wherewith to prick and goad the slothful, the middle is straight to signify righteous rule, while the head is bent or crooked in order to draw in and attract souls to the ways of God.”



When a prelate is not vested for services in the church, he uses a different, smaller staff that is in the form of a walking stick topped with a silver pommel.

The earliest trace of croziers is in the fourth century, but we can never be sure. The reason is that while they are buried with bishops, it may have been just a walking stick and not a symbol. There are some who point out that many of these early croziers are topped with a tau, a “T”-shaped top with the arms curving

downward. This leaves open the possibility that it was used more as a crutch or to lean against when standing for long periods of time in a period when they were no chairs. The first reference of the crozier as a liturgical accoutrement can be found in the Fourth Council of Toledo under Isidore of Seville in December of 633

The veils that are sometimes attached were not originally for highlighting the liturgical color but rather to not allow dirty

hands to touch the metal.

Both the Eastern and Western croziers developed from the same

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traditions. An interesting aside is that the Pope, since the eleventh century, does not have a crozier with crook or snakes at the top. His ferula has a cross on top.

It is difficult to say how the top of the crozier developed. Some point to its present look and say that it symbolizes a shepherd's crook. This is a later development because both East and West used a snake or snakes at the top. For example, a Latin crozier in the twelfth century:

Most Americans find the snakes at the top of a Byzantine crozier confusing. It is not a two-headed snake, but rather two snakes wrapped around the staff. The common explanation alludes to Our Lord's statement in John 3: 14-15: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." This explanation is good but lacking.

The first reference in Sacred Scripture (Exodus 4) to a staff and a snake is at the Burning Bush. Moses is told to cast his staff to the ground, where it becomes a serpent. This was the sign of his divine authority, a staff that was a serpent. If this was the basis then the rod of Asclepius would be more fitting for the crozier:

Another reference to a snake and staff in the Hebrew Scriptures, which works better is found in Numbers 21. The Hebrew people were being bitten by poisonous snakes. Moses was told to make a bronze snake and place it on a pole and lift it up. When the people looked upon it they were cured. The original rod (according to 2 Kings 18) was destroyed by King Hezekiah because people were burning incense before it in worship. This image is important though because there are two snakes. Simply put, there is the good snake that is lifted up on the pole and the bad snake on the ground.

Often the staff is made of wood, as in the Book of Genesis is mentioned the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It is that temptation that the serpent uses to cause Adam and Eve to sin. It is wood again that is raised up in the crucifixion of the Christ. Good and Evil on wood. It is a Christ is lifted up on the cross that he

is the Good Serpent. This is the reason it is conjectured by some icon writers that Christ on the Cross has an "S" shape.



ferula, Western and tau croziers

Two serpents wind their way up the staff and come to the top facing in opposition. Between them is the cross of Christ. Serpents were good in that they brought healing and they evil because they caused illness. It was St John Chrysostom, who in his *Homily on John III*, explains the use of two serpents. In writing about Jesus and Nicodemus he uses the image of the brazen serpent and says: "There the Jews escaped death, but only the temporal; here believers escape eternal death. There the hanging serpent healed the bites of serpents; here the crucified Jesus cured the wounds inflicted by the spiritual dragon, ...There a serpent bit and a serpent healed; here death destroyed and a Death saved." It is a lost understanding that Christ is the Serpent of Life. But it is maintained in iconography. There is a duality in iconography. Christ is at the center. In a desis He is raised up and two



saints are smaller and lower. In the zhezl, He is above them as the cross is above the serpents. We are usually uncomfortable with saying that certain things we have and do are from a pagan influence. But in this case it must be a consideration. The caduceus features two snakes winding around a staff and in most cases with wings. It was associated with the god Hermes. It was a symbol associated with trade, negotiation and wisdom. The ca-

duceus in Roman art was usually seen as being held in left hand of Mercury, the messenger of the gods. It is said that his staff would make a person's death gentle and if they are already dead, it would bring them back to life.

We are familiar with the third bar of the Cross with one end raised and one lowered, but if you look at the more ancient icons of Christ the Pantocrator, you will also notice that one shoulder is lower



than the other. It has been interpreted as the one is the shoulder of righteous judgment and the other is mercy. It is with his right hand he gives a blessing. This is mercy. As at the day of judg-

ment the sheep will be separated from the goats. The righteous will go off to the right. The left hand holds a book, traditionally scripture, upon which a person is judged. The shoulder is raised. The people who did not care for the least ones are sent off to the left. The two serpents on the zhezl and the same size as are the sheep and goats, but the faces are different depicting different judgments.

When a bishop is present for a liturgical celebration it is common for him to leave his zhezl leaning on the icon screen next to the icon of Christ.

The crozier has developed over time. Time makes changes as do artists. In the present we are trying to explain what they did so long ago based upon the symbols used. This is an interpretation because those who made zhezls and posokhs did not write down why they did what they did. Both East and West had staffs for bishops and both used the imagery of a snake. This is what we know, the rest is conjecture based upon usage, iconographic customs and the rare writings of persons at an earlier time.

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