

# Cross to Crucifix

The Feast of the Exaltation of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross is September 14, recalling both the finding of the True Cross of our Lord by Saint Helen, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, in 326 and return of the Relic from its capture as a prize of war when Jerusalem was sacked in 614. It was recovered by forces of the Byzantine Empire (Eastern Roman Empire) in 627.

The Elevation took place on March 21, 630, when Emperor Heraclius entered Jerusalem amidst great rejoicing, and together with Patriarch Zacharios, transferred the Cross of Christ with great solemnity into the temple of the Resurrection, joyously held up for veneration by the Christian faithful.

The True Cross pieces scattered throughout the world show us that the wood was pine. Less reliable sources tell us that the cross was around 15 feet in height and 8 feet across; much of this is based upon the Dismas Cross found in the Church of Relics in Rome. Thieves were crucified on smaller crosses than those charged with a crime against the Emperor, such as a claim to be King of the Jews. This information is also found in the *Fifth Homily* of St. John Chrysostom *On St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*. Irenaeus, Justin, and Tertullian refer to a seat (*equuleus*) that prevented the body's weight from tearing the nail-pierced hands off the cross. There does not seem to be any mention of a footrest (*suppedaneum*) that was supposed to do the same. This is found in later Western art based on Gregory of Tours' work, the *Glories of Martyrs*, in 587. The Roman custom was also to use four nails: two hands and two feet. This is found in many Byzantine images, unlike the Western imagery with the feet being one on top of the other with a single nail.

There is universal agreement on the *titulus* (inscription) over the head. It was not abbreviated as INRI, INBI or IHQI, but everything was spelled out: "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews".

The Cross was not used in art for centuries after the crucifixion because of Roman persecutions, especially in broad daylight. In the catacombs, where anyone could be buried regardless of their faith, one can find Christian art that only Christians would understand. It is possible to find some reflections of Christianity in the cemetery of *Catacombe di Domitilla* where the cross is manifested by the existence of boat anchors in various epitaphs dating to the first, second, and third centuries. The cross was hidden in something else, most commonly an anchor. Or it was used as a reflection of God's promise to Abraham, as St. Paul writes in his letter to the Hebrews, 6:19: "This we have as an anchor of the soul, sure and firm."

It took a while before Christians did art with the Cross. This is because of the experience of Constantine seeing a cross in the sky with the words "by this conquer." Art that included a cross did not appear in any numbers until the sixth century. Some have suggested that the crucifixion scene was not found in art because it was gruesome. Crucifixion scenes depicted Christ holding the Cross (not carrying the cross) and looking serene. He was also depicted on the cross wearing purple robes, the color of royalty or a form of a resurrection crucifix,

While not being seen in art, it was used in practice. Tertullian notes in the year 200, "We Christians wear out our foreheads with the sign of the

Cross. The faithful's original Sign of the Cross was with the right thumb on the forehead. John Chrysostom, when asked for a scriptural basis for this, cited Ezekiel 9:4: "the LORD said to him: 'Pass through the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and mark an X (Greek for the Hebrew letter *taw*) on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the abominations practiced within it.'"

The "Discipline of the Secret" was partly why the crucifixion was not depicted. Information that was only to be known by those who completed the Mysteries of Initiation. Converts might be scared away by Jesus' shameful death. So when asked for detail, John Chrysostom would remark, "The initiated will know what I mean."

Since the Cross was so important, it was used initially only as a symbol of triumph. In this form, the cross had no *corpus* (Latin: "body", of Christ). Still, it was elaborately decorated and often even jeweled to represent Christ's victory over death. It made an object of shame into a thing of beauty. This type of cross is called a *crux gemmata*, and it was the first widespread form of the cross in Christianity.

Because the Council of Chalcedon (451) declared Jesus as God and Man in the fifth century, the focus of the crucifixion scene was upon Jesus' divinity. Jesus may be wearing liturgical garments or a crown. His eyes are open, and His arms are outstretched straight because He is alive or the outstretched arms in prayer. There may be images of the sun and moon because He is the Lord of creation.

It was more of a Western custom to focus on the suffering of Christ on the Cross.

The presence of Christ on the Cross has always been controversial.

As St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians notes, we preach Christ crucified. Paul knows that Jesus rose yet he must still preach the crucifixion. We keep Christ on the cross because we, too, preach Christ crucified. The crucifixion reminds us of God's power and His love for us, giving up His only-begotten Son for suffering to death. We are also reminded of our suffering when we must pick up our cross and follow Him. Here we do not share so much in the glory of the Resurrection as we do in the sufferings of the Crucifixion. We must die with Christ as Romans 6:8: "If, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him." An interesting comment to the Galatians in 3:1: O stupid Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?" These people were never in Jerusalem, so how was Jesus Christ publicly portrayed as crucified?"

We look at the crucifixion as also a fulfillment of prophecy. Our Lord said in John 3:14-16: "And just as Moses lifted the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted, so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life." For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but might have eternal life." So we must look upon Christ lifted up on the cross to have eternal life.

Using a crucifix does not deny the Resurrection. The cross is not a period, but a comma. More is to come. We want to show how much God loves us when we wear the crucifix. Wearing a cross does not mean we deny the Resurrection.

by Fr Jonathan Morse