

The Cross

The world of Christian symbols is a hierarchy of signs that have their origin in divine forms of which they are images, according to St. John of Damascus [Three Apologies Against the Iconoclasts]. The sacred central point of this world is the sign of the Holy Cross, symbol of the New Testament, symbol of victory over death, and the intersection of the heavenly and the earthly. As St. John Damascene further states: As the four ends of the Cross are held together and united by its center, so are the height and the depths, the length and the breadth, that is, all creation visible and invisible, held together by the power of God [The Orthodox Faith}. This is affirmed by St. John Chrysostom, who pointed out that the Cross is the joining of the heavenly and the earthly and the defeat of Hell [Works, Vol. II, Bk. 1, St. Petersburg, 1905, p.953].

The whole purpose of a man's life is knowledge of the Cross, that, at the end of his road, he might say: I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me (Gal. 2:20). In order to become a temple, a repository of the Spirit of God, the soul should follow the Lord step by step along the way of the Cross until, at last, all that remains for it is to be lifted up on the Cross in spirit, after which follows spiritual resurrection in the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Did not the Lord Himself tell us, that he who does not take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me (Matt. 10:38)?

The Holy Apostles, having heard the Savior speak of His own crucifixion and death on the Cross, and knowing the words of Old Testament Scripture that had been fulfilled, were wont to say: What God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ should suffer, He thus fulfilled (Acts 3:18). And the early Fathers, faithful to the Apostolic Tradition, explained that, as the forces of death had entered into man with the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, even so would eternal life enter into the world with the tree of life which, on earth, has been transformed into the Cross of Christ.

This Tree of Life, united in the Cross of Golgotha, was seen in the Old Testament as the brass serpent which Moses made on the tree in obedience to God's command, by which those who had been bitten by poisonous serpents, upon looking at this brass serpent would remain alive. This was referred to by the Lord, Who said: And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life (John 3:14-15).

Now everyone who looks to the Cross with faith receives salvation and protection; and as pointed out in the words of the Savior earlier, it is bound up with the idea of bearing a Cross (Matt. 10:38). The only way to union with Christ is union through an imitation of His death; to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ is to be baptized into His death. Thus all the preaching of the Apostles is of Christ crucified: We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called,

both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:23-24). This teaching of the Apostles led to the transformation of mankind into the Body of Christ.

The Holy Apostles created the Church, the destiny of which was to suffer crucifixion together with Christ and, like Him, to be buried and to rise again from the dead. This process, then, is the Church's meaning and justification, summed up in the words of the Apostle Paul: For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His. We know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him (Rom. 6:5-8).

The earliest forms of the Cross in Christian art took the form of the depiction of the Cross as a monogram of the name of Jesus Christ. One of the earliest pictorial form of the Cross, for example, was the Greek letter X (dating from the 2nd Century), which later became known as the Cross of St. Andrew. Later this X was bisected vertically by the Greek letter I, forming, in Greek, the name Jesus Christ. By the middle of the 3rd Century, the meaning of this Cross as a monogram gave way to the idea of a six-pointed Cross symbolizing the original image of the universe, for its six points represented the six days of the creation of the world.

The actual instrument of execution used in the Roman Empire, however, normally consisted of a three-pointed cross made of two planks knocked together in the shape of the Greek letter T. According to Tertullian (2nd Century), both the Greek letter T and the Latin T were images of the Cross of Christ. According to Church Tradition, St. Anthony the Great (f 356) wore the T-Cross on his clothing and St. Zeno, Bishop of Verona, had a T-shaped Cross erected on the dome of a basilica built by him in 362 A.D. Thus, with a greater desire of Christians to imitate the actual Cross of Christ, the T-Cross became prevalent.

By the 5th Century, however, the four-pointed Cross became more popular under two forms: the so-called Greek Cross (+) and the Latin Cross (t). In the Greek the cross-piece is of equal length to the upright, in the Latin the upright is of greater length. The tradition that the Cross of Golgotha had four points was upheld by St. Irenaeus of Lyons and by St. Augustine; but the Church did admit a variety of forms of the Cross. As St. Theodore of Studium says, a cross of any shape is a true cross!

By the 6th Century, Christian art had arrived at the direct representation of the crucifixion; but even then, almost three hundred years after the Emperor Constantine had abolished execution by crucifixion, for many the direct representation of the crucified Christ remained a stumbling block. Only gradually was the symbolic representation of Christ on the Cross replaced by the depiction of the actual crucifix

(i.e., the crucified Christ), which in the East, culminated in the eight-pointed Cross most common in the Russian Orthodox Church. The first written mention of the veneration of the crucifix only occurs at the end of the 7th Century.

According to St. John of Damascus: By the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ death was overcome, original sin was absolved, hell deprived of its prey, resurrection given and the strength to despise the present and even death itself, and the way was prepared to the blessedness that had been in the beginning, the gates of Paradise opened, our nature took up its seat upon the right hand of God and we became the children and heirs of God. All this was done by the Cross [The Orthodox Faith]. The instrument of shameful execution was transformed into the gateway of Paradise and it became the sacred task of Christian art to express all of this. For this reason the use of gold and precious stones was connected with the desire to represent the Cross as the radiant beginning of a world transformed, as the tree of immortality, as the torch of the knowledge of God.

To the Inner Liturgical Tradition of the Church belongs the teaching of the liturgical use of the Cross and the significance of the Sign of the Cross. According to the Blessed Augustine: Unless the Sign of the Cross is made on the foreheads of the faithful, as on the water itself wherewith they are regenerated, or on the oil with which they are anointed with chrism, or on the sacrifice with which they are nourished, none of these things is duly performed [From A Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship. London, 1972, pp. 185-186]. By the Sign of the Cross the gates are opened through which the grace of the Holy Spirit is poured forth upon the faithful, transfiguring the earthly and the heavenly in their souls, laying low sin, conquering death and breaking down the barrier, invisible to the sensual eye, that separates us from the knowledge of God.

In the Sacrament of Holy Orders, the Priest receives the power to celebrate the Sacraments from the moment of the laying-on of hands when the Bishop, making the Sign of the Cross over him three times, calls upon the Holy Trinity to send down the abundant grace of the Holy Spirit upon him. A newly-erected church building is transformed into a temple of the Lord only after the Altar and walls have been signed with the Cross in Holy Oil.

At the Divine Liturgy, the Priest makes the Sign of the Cross with the Holy Lamb, and this is one of the most mysterious moments of the Eucharist. The first Sign of the Cross at the elevation of the whole Lamb sanctifies the air. The second Sign of the Cross, made as the four parts of the Lamb are arranged upon the paten, sanctifies the ground. The third Sign of the Cross, as the particles are placed in the chalice, sanctifies the four corners of the world. After this, the warmth (warm water) is added to the chalice, poured in the Sign of the Cross. The communicants approach the chalice with crossed arms. Thus, without the Cross, there is no sacrament, no life and no salvation. It is for this reason that we sing the triumphant hymn of the Holy Cross:

Before Thy Cross, we bow down in worship, O Master, and Thy holy Resurrection, we glorify!

Types of Crosses.

Tau (or T): This is so-called because it resembles the Greek letter of that name. This was the typical Cross used for Roman crucifixions.

St. Andrews: According to Church tradition, this is the type of Cross on which St. Andrew the First-called Apostle was put to death.

Greek: This Cross has arms of equal length and was probably developed by the Greeks as having a more perfect form.

Patriarchal: This Cross has two horizontal arms with the upper one shorter than the lower. The top arm represents the inscription placed by Pilate on the Cross (Matt. 27:37).

Three-Barred: This Cross existed very early in Byzantium, but was adopted by the Russian Orthodox Church and especially popularized in the Slavic countries. The upper arm represents the inscription over Christ's head, and the lower slanting arm represents His footrest. Many of these Crosses are also found with the lower arm straight, rather than slanted.

Latin: This is the most common style of Cross in the Western Churches, and is so-called since it was originally popularized by the Roman Catholic (Latin) Church.

Graded (or Calvary): This is the Latin Cross with a base of three steps, representing (from the top) faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13).

Papal: This has three arms, each longer than the other, the two top ones signifying the crosses of the two thieves crucified beside Christ. This Cross is used only in Papal processions.

Cross Bottonnee (or Budded): This Cross received its name because the points appear to be capped with what appears to be a tree bud. The three-fold points (Trefoil) stand for the Holy Trinity.

Celtic: This is also called the Iona or Irish Cross, since it dates back to very early times in Great Britain and Ireland. It is said to have been taken from Ireland to the island of Iona by St. Columba in the 6th Century. The circle, symbol of eternity, suggests the eternity of Redemption.

Jerusalem (or Crusader): This Cross has four small crosses between the arms, symbolizing the five wounds of Christ. It also stands for missionary work, the small crosses indicating the four corners of the earth.

Maltese: This consists of four spearheads with points together. The eight points represent the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-10). This Cross is named for the island of Malta (the place where St. Paul was shipwrecked Acts 27:14-44), since it was the headquarters of one of the Crusader group that utilized this Cross.

Cross Patee: This is often confused with the Maltese Cross. The former is made up of straight lines, while the Cross Patee has curved arms.

Cross Barbee: This Cross has ends like fish hooks, suggesting the Christians as fishers of men (Matt. 4:19).

Fleur-De-Lis: This is French for *flower of the lily*. It symbolizes the Holy Trinity.

Fylfot: This is better known to us by the name swastika, and is a symbol that seems to have been connected with sun worship as early as 1500 B.C. It was used in the catacombs as a symbol of Christ, the Sun of Righteousness.

Egyptian (or Coptic): This Cross with a loop at the top appeared in Egyptian hieroglyphics meaning life. It has been adopted by the Coptic Christians since Christ is the Tree of Life (John 14:6).

Anchor: This symbol combines an anchor with a Cross, symbolizing hope (Heb. 6:19), and was used by the early Christians in the catacombs.

Cross And Orb: This is a Cross resting on a globe, symbolizing the triumph of the Gospels throughout the earth.

Cross And Crown: This is a Cross in a crown, symbolizing the reward of the faithful after death (Rev. 2:10).

Cross Fitchee: This is any Cross whose lower arm is sharpened. This is said to have been used by the Crusaders who carried Crosses with a pointed lower end so they could be thrust into the ground easily at the time of devotions.

Cross Of Lorraine: This has two horizontal arms, a short one near the top and a longer one near the base.

Cross Trefflee: This is another form of the Cross Botonnee, with arms of equal length, with each end formed as a trefoil.

Cross Crosslet: These are four Latin Crosses joined at their bases, representing Christianity spreading in the four directions. This is seen as a missionary symbol

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