

## Faces of the Cross



By Anna Von Reitz

All over the world, the cross is recognized as "the" symbol of Christianity, yet, as we all have cause to know now, Jesus was executed on a Roman torture stake, not a cross at all.

Throughout the Middle East and North Africa, Turkey, and Greece, the Romans used torture stakes, simple posts set in the ground, without cross arms. They didn't waste good wood on criminals--- especially not out in the backwater and arid territories like Judea.

So we may be sure that Jesus had his arms stretched out above his head on a single post without a crossbar---- a torture stake, not a cross at all.

Astonishingly, the symbol of Christianity is a lie.

Among all the other odd truths I have had to share with you, there's one to think about. Why have we been taught to venerate a lie? Was it just a mistake made by later generations, and if so, why hasn't it been corrected?

The actual symbol of "a" cross pre-dates Jesus by many, many centuries. It goes back to what is called "the World Cross" --- an equal-armed cross still used by the Knights of Malta, which symbolizes the intersection of the world of spirit and the world of flesh.

Symbolically, we all live at the intersection, in a moment called "now" --- which is a time without a time, in a space without a space, where Alpha and Omega meet and everything that was meets everything that is and everything that will be.

The Cross is the sign of God in us, but not an accurate sign of what Jesus suffered.

As a Lutheran I grew up with a "plain cross" --- a simple, unequal armed cross that is empty. There is no trace of the body of Jesus hanging upon it. Not even the nails are left. Just a plain empty cross.

As a child, I liked that, because it proclaimed to me --- he is risen. He is not here. He is not hanging on this horrible, gruesome contraption like a piece of meat. I still like that. That is, to me, the true take-home message.

The Catholic Crucifix by comparison is a totally different thing that intersects reality at a different moment. Here we find Jesus still suffering, or still dead, depending on how you look at it and how the artist portrays it.

One day I was at a local Catholic Church for some meeting or other for Foster Parents Plan and Habitat for Humanity and some of the other charities including Catholic Social Services. The leaders of these groups had all had a big meeting and it was late in the afternoon as we broke up.

Everyone else hurried homeward. I wandered through the Nave of the church, past the baptismal font, and paused, looking up at the giant life-sized crucifix and the figure of Jesus attached to it. His face was slack, no longer in agony, but dead. Yes, definitely dead.

The priest of the parish walked up almost silently behind me, his feet making no sound on the deeply carpeted aisle. I was startled when he spoke.

"What do you see?" he inquired.

"Jesus, dead on the cross, waiting for Joseph to come take him down."

"What do you think it means?" he asked.

"I think it is a reminder of what our sins have cost and what we owe."

"What else?"

"I think the Devil is laughing. I think it is a reminder that, in some sense, he won. At least, temporarily. "

"There," the priest admitted, "you have it all."

I thought --- not quite.

There is the Rest of the Story, the plain and empty cross.

Or, as it turns out, the empty torture stake, standing like any other innocent post in the world, his blood being washed away by the wind and the rain, bleached by the sun.

There is the veil between life and death being torn asunder, just like the edges of the Red Sea being pulled apart.

I left the pensive priest standing there, still looking up at the scene of death and defeat. I had someone to meet. I went home and lit a candle, poured myself a glass of red wine, and ate my crust of bread and soup for dinner that night.

And he was there with me, the Lord of the Heavens, being remembered as he asked for us to remember him, whenever we drink wine, whenever we break bread.

Because I know Jesus, I can tell you that he didn't mean to make Communion into a franchise operation. He meant it to be exactly what he said --- a remembrance of him, an in-dwelling of his spirit and his teaching in us, in the same way that we drink in wine and eat our bread.

"For man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

He wants to be with us. Not just when we are being holy, but when we are celebrating, when we are sad, in all the circumstances and places of our lives. He wants to sit down at the table with us, and be remembered.

Imagine what would happen in the world if we all just did what he asked us to do, and remembered him every time we drank wine, every time bread passed our lips?

I don't take the cross as my emblem, much less the crucifix. For me, it's what he asked for, the glass of wine, the loaf of bread. It's the silent remembrance when nobody is looking. Communion is my heart reaching out and sharing my life with him, day by day.

There are so many people who feel such emptiness within, who search and don't even know they are searching. It never occurs to them that we are in God, and God is in us, inextricably combined, part of the same family in spirit, never alone, never apart, not separated from All That Is.

There are so many who feel alienated from the Church and from any spiritual practice at all. They are well and truly lost. Unable to trust in anything beyond themselves and bearing witness to nothing more than death and taxes. They rant about all the evils of the world or stare sullenly and silently at the eventuality of their own death, grim and vacuous and so superior to the rest of us because they believe in "the uselessness of it all".

One wonders why they bother to live, or if they do?

And me, I plod forward, and keep my way, not deterred by all the failings of men and their institutions; the Sanhedrin failed, and so may the Church, and all the Governments, but the Goodness of the True God does not fail us, come what may.

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