



**He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death
—even death on a cross. PHIL 2:8**

The Tragic and Triumphant Cross

The cross stands at the very heart of the Christian faith. It is Christianity's most important and powerful symbol. Like all true symbols, it evokes more than can be explained in words and contains multiple levels of meaning. The cross reminds us of the suffering and death of Jesus; it also reminds us of his victory over death and his glorious, risen life. The cross is the world's most hated instrument of torture, the most horrible form of punishment. It expresses some of humanity's deepest fears: pain, betrayal, abandonment, death. Yet, the cross is also the symbol of humanity's greatest hope—that suffering and death do not have the last word, that life does arise from death, that God is trustworthy.

The power of the sign of the cross is nowhere more beautifully expressed than in the ritual for receiving candidates into the catechumenate—the Rite of Acceptance—to begin their preparation for baptism. In some parishes, the candidates are asked to place their hands on a large wooden cross as a sign of their acceptance of the cross of Christ. The presider prays for each candidate by name while tracing the cross on the candidate's forehead: "Receive the cross on your forehead. It is Christ himself who now strengthens you with this sign of love. Learn to know him and follow him."

The sponsors of the candidates then trace the cross over the candidate's ears, eyes, lips, breast, shoulders, hands, and feet:

Receive the sign of the cross on your ears,
that you may hear the voice of the Lord.
Receive the sign of the cross on your eyes,
that you may see the glory of God.
Receive the sign of the cross on your lips,
that you may respond to the word of God.
Receive the sign of the cross over your heart,
that Christ may dwell there by faith.
Receive the sign of the cross on your shoulders,
that you may bear the gentle yoke of Christ.
Receive the sign of the cross on your hands,
that Christ may be known in the work which you do.
Receive the sign of the cross on your feet,
that you may walk in the way of Christ.

This practice of signing with the cross continues throughout the life of the baptized. Following an ancient practice, we trace the cross on our forehead, lips, and heart as we prepare to hear the Gospel proclaimed. Catholic and Orthodox Christians make the sign of the cross at the beginning of liturgy or prayer, a dramatic gesture tracing the cross over the whole body. Sometimes parents trace the cross on the forehead of their children as they put them to bed each night. Truly, the followers of Jesus are marked with the cross, the symbol that expresses most explicitly who we are.

Reflection and discussion

- What is my favorite image of the cross? What is its particular meaning for me?

- What message do I proclaim when I wear a cross on my neck or hang a crucifix in my home?

In the country of Lithuania, there is a pilgrimage site called the Hill of Crosses. Here hundreds of thousands of crosses, of all sizes and descriptions, are spiked into its sacred ground. Pilgrims come to this hill from every corner of the country, carrying their crosses, desiring to leave a memorial to their pain, to express a heart-felt need, or to offer thanks for a recent blessing. Some crosses are painstakingly carved, others are crude and bare; some hold images of Christ or the Virgin Mary, others hold pictures of loved ones who died during the Nazi occupation, who were deported to Siberia, or who suffered and died under the sign of the cross.

This hill is called the soul of Lithuania, a vivid relic of its past, a reminder of its cruel and glorious history. The hill was bulldozed over and over again during the Soviet occupation, out of disdain for the “ignorance and fanaticism” that it represented to them. But no force could prevent the faithful from returning at night to start over again. The Hill of Crosses is a powerful symbol of resistance to occupation and oppression, an enduring sign of strength and hope.

The cross is planted on mountaintops around the world and displayed on the walls of Christian homes. It is mounted on church tops and dangled around the necks of disciples. We find rugged wooden crosses and ornately jeweled crosses, images of the suffering Christ and images of the risen Christ affixed to the cross. The symbol of the cross has the power to galvanize the followers of Jesus. In processions and liturgies, in poetry and music, in architecture and devotions, the cross speaks to what we believe about Jesus and about how we understand our lives in relationship to him. It is the primordial symbol by which we express our commitment to Christ and through which we experience the love of God.

The passion and death of Jesus on the cross was the heart of the earliest Christian proclamation and the center of Christian belief. Paul taught that Jesus humbled himself, becoming like a slave, obedient unto death, “even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). His death was “foolishness” in the eyes of the world, a “stumbling-block” for many, yet in God’s design “wisdom” and “power” (1 Cor 1:18, 23–24). The gospels reach their climax in the passion accounts. In the gospel of Mark, the question “Who do you say I am?” is answered most fully at the death of Jesus on the cross: “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Mark 15:39).

In every age it is tempting to deny the full reality of the cross. We like serene crucifixes. The gospel could be made much more intellectually and emotionally attractive if we suppressed its most distinctive feature—the crucifixion of Jesus. Every age of Christianity is tempted to explain salvation in a way that can be defended by logical argument and will not make us look foolish—in a way that denies the full reality of the cross. Plain and simple, the cross is a scandal. We must not deny its scandalous nature so that, as Paul says, “the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power” (1 Cor 1:17).

A God who remained isolated from human suffering, majestically insulated in his heaven, would not be a convincing or reliable God in our suffering world. The cross is our most powerful reminder that God is with us even in pain and tragedy and seemingly hopeless situations. Paul gave meaning to his own suffering by considering suffering an opportunity to be united in the love that Jesus showed in his death on the cross: “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (2 Cor 4:10). Paul said that his own wounds are “the marks of Jesus” on his body (Gal 6:17). Though suffering is often senseless and irrational, we do not suffer alone. Such realization allows us to endure and accept the suffering that is part of our human condition and the pain that comes in every life.

Reflection and discussion

- Why are we tempted to deny the full reality of the cross?

- In his life for us, Christ has plunged into the depth of every human experience. What comfort or hope does this truth offer me?

Often human suffering is not inevitable or irrational; it is the result of human sinfulness. People are oppressed by others and by human systems that prevent them from living with dignity. The cross is a symbol of resistance to this type of suffering. The cross empowers Christians to resist evil, rather than be complicit in it. Our task is not to mirror our culture but to convert it, and the cross calls us to do just that in the most radical of ways. The folk art of Central America depicts scenes of joyful life and simple abundance painted on the form of the cross. It is a wonderful expression of human resistance in the midst of oppression, of the choice to live abundantly despite life's hardships, of hope that suffering will be transformed.

For Jesus, the cross was not just his final act; it expressed his entire life of sacrifice for others, of laying down his life out of love. The life of a disciple is described by Jesus as following in his way: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). For us, the cross is the symbol that pouring out our lives for another brings new life when we do it in imitation of Jesus. In every age and in every place the followers of Jesus must choose between the way of the crowd and the way of the cross. The call to follow Jesus in service of all kinds is always shaped by the cross.

Reflection and discussion

- In what way is the cross counter-cultural today?

- Why is it necessary to express the message of the cross anew in every generation?

This study invites us to stand at the foot of the cross and to gaze on it through the eyes of the various biblical writers. The writings of the gospels, selected Old Testament texts, and the letters of Paul and others will help us reflect on the meaning of the cross and gradually probe its mystery. No single interpretation of the cross is adequate to explain it all. The cross is a sign that is both tragic and triumphant, a call to persevere in the way of suffering and a power that offers renewal and hope.

The logic of the cross seems to fly in the face of common sense. Why is suffering and death the way to life? Why is the dreaded cross our clearest sign of hope? Why is this instrument of torture the universal symbol that inspires more people than any other? What does the call of Jesus to take up the cross imply for my life? The cross is a great paradox: we will never fully understand it. The tragedy outside the walls of Jerusalem in A.D. 30 was God's triumph over sin, death, and meaningless existence. This is the great mystery that we will seek to unravel as we study the tragic and triumphant cross.

Prayer

Crucified Lord, there is no depth of human experience to which you have not plunged. You know the darkness of fear, the loneliness of suffering, the dread of depression, and the agony of death. You entered fully into the intensity of human pain and transformed it by your love. Through your holy cross, you have brought light out of darkness, life out of death, and you have redeemed the world. As I reflect on the great mystery of your cross, teach me to be a cross-bearing disciple so that I can extend your love to the world.