

Cross or Crucifix

When we come to celebrate the liturgy, we bring the suffering of our lives, of our families, our church, and our world. We gather to celebrate the paschal mystery and to give thanks for the saving action of Christ in our lives. As we begin our prayer together, we mark ourselves with the sign of the cross, a sign of our unity with Christ and each other. The symbol of the cross and the image of Christ crucified may be the most prominent of our faith. We wear the crucifix around our necks, we find it in our homes and adorning our rosary.

The crucifix has not always been such an important symbol. In the early church, images of Christ victorious or as the Good Shepherd were common. The image of a regal Christ, with crown and purple robes, seated in glory, was also seen frequently. It was not until the fourth century that the cross became a common image in Christian art. Centuries later, in the 1100's, the crucifix with a more realistic image of the suffering Christ became more and more common.

After the Reformation and efforts to reinforce the core elements of Catholic belief, the crucifix became a prominent and central image in the sanctuary of a Catholic church building. For more than 400 years, the crucifix was located on or above the main altar table.

After the Second Vatican Council, we experienced many changes in the liturgy and in our places of worship. The 1975 edition of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) stated that in the church there was "to be a cross, clearly visible to the congregation, either on the altar or near it."

The original Latin "cruX" was translated in this passage simply as "cross." In some places, this was interpreted to allow for variations in the traditional crucifix. Examples can be found of a simple or decorative cross without a corpus, an image of the risen Christ with the cross, or the risen Christ with no cross present.

The revised GIRM gives us clear guidance on the place of the crucifix in our church buildings. Paragraph #308 states that there is "to be a cross, with the figure of Christ crucified upon it, either on the altar or near it, where it is clearly visible to the assembled congregation." In the same paragraph we are also instructed that "It is appropriate that such a cross, which calls to mind for the faithful the saving Passion of the Lord, remain near the altar even outside of liturgical celebrations." If a church does not have a cross with the body of Christ on it near the altar, plans should be made to obtain one.

In Built of Living Stones, the US Bishops' document on art and architecture for worship, we read "The cross with the image of Christ crucified is a reminder of Christ's paschal mystery. It draws us into the mystery of suffering and makes tangible our belief that our suffering when united with the passion and death of Christ leads to redemption" (BLS #91).