

The Cross and the Crucifix

A Lent reflection

[R.C.I.A.]

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The Church is constantly reminding us that Lent is a season of repentance. It is a season of sackcloth and ashes; a season of turning from sin; a season of preparing for the future. It is a season of preparing for our own suffering and death. As we look around us, as we look at ourselves, we must certainly ask an obvious question: “Am I really doing something to prepare myself for Lent; or is life going on the same as before?” Have I responded to the call for repentance; or have I failed? If the answer is no, then we may well have surrendered the Divinity of Christ on His cross for the sake of being a modern Christian, or not being a Christian at all; for we are embracing the cross and not the crucifix.

If the answer is yes, that I am extending myself in penance, self-denial and personal sacrifice, then I am embracing the crucifix. For the crucifix is as far from the cross as the east is to the west. Lent then certainly is the choice between the cross and the crucifix. For the cross and the crucifix are the modern Christian dichotomies.

Our modern and enlightened society strives to remove Christ from His cross, not out of pity but out of selfishness. The world would be happy if we saw our faith as an empty cross. For an empty cross presents us with only spiritual bankruptcy. An empty cross does not accuse, but a crucifix condemns our selfishness. The world is unhappy with us that we see our faith as a crucifix because a crucifix requires, demands, commitment from us. The crucifix tells of pain and suffering; the world does not want to know of pain and suffering. If you do not look at pain and suffering, it will go away. If you do not look at the crucifix we do not have to change our lives. The world says: do not look at the crucifix because we are not responsible. How can we be Christians and not look? So, I ask you to look with me.

What is a cross and what is a crucifix? The cross is only a symbol but the crucifix is a reality. The cross requires an explanation; but the crucifix requires no explanation. The cross is humanity vs. Divinity. The cross speaks of time, the crucifix speaks of eternity. The cross speaks of religion, but the crucifix tells of salvation. The cross is goodness compared to love; it is trust compared to change. The cross speaks to the flesh and tells us that a life is at stake but the crucifix speaks to the spirit and tells us that a soul is at

stake. The one is worldly profanity; the other is holy and sacred.

Modern society welcomes and rushes to embrace the cross because it does not accuse. Modern society despises the crucifix because it condemns our selfishness. “We adore you, oh Christ, and we praise you because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.” To some, what I have just said may seem a bit strong and possibly one sided. After all, we make the sign of the cross many times during the day; at times we reverence the wood of the cross. At other times we use the cross as an identification mark for our buildings and our books. When it comes to our faith and to our soul it is the crucifix and not the cross that shows the way.

I know by now you have made your own observations. The most obvious difference is that one has a corpse and the other does not. Another difference is a simple ordinary nail. Without the nail the body could never hang on the cross. The nail is what pins and holds Christ to the cross. The nail is the difference between a soul in heaven and a soul in hell.

There is a song we sing at our Good Friday service; it asks a very pointed question: “Were you there when they crucified the Lord?” Do you know the answer? The answer is, yes! Yes! You and I were present; we are present and will continue to be present. Why? Because Jesus is crucified every day in the one act of crucifixion, an act which spans the ages. It is mankind who commits sin. We are the executioners. We nail Jesus to the cross everyday when we commit sin, when we turn from God by an act of our will. The nail represents our sins and each time we commit sin we hammer that nail, that sin, into Jesus and keep Him on the cross. Nails hurt, sins hurt.

The world likes to tell us that sin is old fashioned; that sin does not exist. There are even some good and religious people who argue that it is just about impossible to commit sin. Why do they say this? If they agree that sin exists, then the crucifix becomes more important than the cross. The reality is more important than a symbol and then we must bare our responsibility. If sin does not exist then we are guiltless. To develop the sense of guilt is one of the crying needs of our society. Society places the responsibility for sin, for guilt, on everything except where it should be placed; namely on our own self-will and pride.

It may be interesting to inquire why the modern world has lost its sense

of sin and guilt. It is the consequence of the loss of the value of life, the value of mankind and the value of a soul. Many view man as a biological phenomenon with no destiny. They place more value on birds, fish and animals than on the life of an unborn child. Once we lose sight of our mortal end and that our actions, thoughts and words are registered in the book of life and one day will determine our eternal destiny; then sin becomes meaningless. We lose all sense of our fear of the Lord, which is wisdom.

The dichotomy that mankind suffers from is fear of giving up their lifestyle. They want salvation but not from their sins. They want salvation as long as it is easy. They want salvation but on their own terms. The idea is that God loves us so much that He will save us no matter what. To be saved from poverty, from war, from ignorance, from disease, from insecurity. These are only our worldly concerns and do not retrieve us from our passions and pride. This is social Christianity, so popular today that it makes us into social workers and lovers of symbols. This kind of social Christianity is very comfortable and leaves our individual consciences alone.

Remember the gospel of the temptation of Jesus! The first temptation by Satan was to try to induce Jesus to give up the salvation of souls and concentrate on social salvation by turning stones into bread; to have Jesus embrace a cross and not a crucifix. Jesus told Satan to get lost. Salvation of the soul is the issue, not salvation of the body. The crucifix is more important than the cross. They want to be saved as long as they don't have to do anything. They think that sacrifice is not a part of love, but love is about sacrifice. Love without sacrifice is just a platitude that follows the cross. Love with sacrifice follows the crucifix. Love wants to see its beloved perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect. The crowd shouted "come down from the cross and we will believe!" Isn't that also what society shouts; for the cross is less painful and easier to live with than the crucifix. They want to be saved but in their own way; not God's way. There is tremendous egotism, conceit and pride in wanting to do it their way. Individuals who say 'I will serve God my way and you serve Him your way ought to inquire if it would not be advisable to serve God in God's way. The prospect of a religion that does not bend the truth to meet circumstances is very frightening. If conscience is uneasy then they want a religion that leaves out hell. Then they choose the cross and rebel against the crucifix.

There has been no single influence which has done more to prevent man from finding God, done more to lower the moral tone of society than to

deny personal guilt and to deny personal sinfulness. This denial throws away the nail that pins Christ to His cross. They embrace only an empty piece of wood and not the crucifix. The great mistake of our time is to believe that the mutual relationship between God and man could be abolished without affecting our morals. It may take a little time to prove the fallacy of the statement that it makes no difference what you believe but how you live. Sooner or later we discover it does make a difference, for we act on our beliefs. If we think wrongly, we act wrongly. If we do not suit our lives to morality, we end up suiting morality to our lives. Sinners of old knew they were sinners and wanted to be right; the sinners of today think they are saints and do not want to be right. We are powerless to resist sin if we do not recognize it as such. We deceive ourselves and become indifferent to sin. If we called sin by its right name it would lose its seductiveness. Hell can be made attractive only by surfacing it with gold. The cross is made attractive because of its lack of accusation.

Today it is rare to find someone doing penance for their sins; embracing the crucifix to their soul and saying "Lord, I'm sorry." The most terrible consequence is that the loss of the sense of sin destroys our yearning for redemption. A man who does not know he is sick feels no need for a doctor. A man who does not acknowledge his sins feels no need for redemption. The crucifix assures us that there is no redemption except from sin. A change of heart, mind and soul can only be found at the foot of the crucifix. Once this purpose of life is lost there is nothing left but skepticism, pessimism and a complete conversion to earthly things, which is a sign of mortal sin.

There is a paradox mentality among some modern Christians. Why is it they tend to get as far away from Christ as they can without falling into the abyss, without falling into hell? Did you ever walk at the very edge of a steep cliff? It's terrifying; common sense pulls us back to a safe distance. Why then do they walk at the edge of hell without fear? Maybe they deny there is a hell or because they deny there is a God! Should we not try to get as close to Christ as we can for security, rather than to get as far away from Him for insecurity? Has Satan confounded and tricked us into embracing an empty cross in place of the crucifix? This makes the abyss of hell an illusion.

In a word, the time to reform is now. That's what Lent is all about. Society, the world, is in such a state of confusion and panic it does not know which way to turn. It does no good to shout "come back", "come to the crucifix", "come to Christ", because the world is blind. The blind will follow

if we lead; that means we must go first. Is this not the way Jesus led His followers? He said: "Come follow me" and His path led to the crucifixion. Can we do less and still be His followers? Look upon the cross and decide. Look on the crucifix and decide. Your soul is in your hands!