

Crucifix or Plain Cross?

By Jim Penrice

Even the difference between a crucifix and a plain cross can become a source of division among Christians. Those who oppose the Catholic Church to the extreme like to say a crucifix “keeps Jesus on the cross forever,” a sign that his death is really not complete because—according to them—Catholics crucify Christ over and over again at every Mass.

Anyone with even a basic knowledge of Catholic sacramental theology knows this isn't true. And while both a crucifix and a cross are worthy symbols to direct the attention of a Christian to the Savior, a crucifix is a richer symbol. I would like to simply share my own perspective when I look at each, a perspective informed by the historical fact that Jesus Christ was not the only person to be crucified—but his crucifixion was unique among the many, many thousands of others who were killed by this procedure.

When I look at a plain cross with nobody depicted on it, I see an instrument of torture and execution upon which many thousands of people were slaughtered at the hands of the Roman government (as well as others) over a period of about a thousand years.

When I look at a crucifix depicting Jesus on one of these crosses, I see only one of the many thousands of executions that took place through crucifixion—one that was extraordinarily unique. Here God's own Son willingly succumbed to this humiliating and awful torture out of total, selfless love for sinners. In this unique crucifixion Jesus Christ took on humanity's most vile enemy and conquered it for all time. This was a unique crucifixion, vastly different from all the others taking place on this same instrument.

On a crucifix I see an image of the total, self-sacrificing and self-giving love and mercy of the God who laid down his life for us; a plain cross suggests that potential, a crucifix displays it. While both are valid and worthy symbols of Jesus Christ, a crucifix is a much more powerful and accurate reminder of who he is and what he did for us.