

## The Holy Rood Guild / Notes 3 - Processional Cross

The cross is the mark of our identity as Christians. Signed with a cross at our baptism, we are most basically cross-bearers, Christbearers. The cross identifies us as those claimed by Christ. We belong to him, purchased at the price of his own blood. Baptized into Christ, the cross is our destiny and our only hope.

Paul could therefore write boldly to the Galatians: "May I never boast except in the cross of Christ." (6:14) Yet for many early Christians the cross was an embarrassing symbol with its associations of scandal and humiliation. The first crosses displayed in public were small, timid inscriptions, not easily identifiable. There were X-shaped and T-shaped crosses and even little anchor-shaped crosses. Indeed for those Christians threatened with persecution the cross was a frightening symbol.

The 4th century saw more confident depictions of the cross. It was sometimes adorned with the Lamb or the Hand of God in blessing. The persecution of the Church had ended. Christianity had been legitimized by Constantine, who abolished crucifixion throughout the empire out of respect for Christ.

It was Constantine who first used the cross in official public insignia. He placed it on the imperial diadem as well as on the shields of his troops. Early accounts are inconsistent, but it seems that just before the battle of the Milvian bridge, he had a dream in which Christ told him to paint on the shields of his soldiers an inverted "X" with one arm curved over -  $\rho$ . This chi-rho, a kind of cross formed by the intersection of the letters X and P, (the initials of Christ's name in Greek) would be their safeguard in battle. Constantine soon commissioned artisans to craft the cross of his vision in gold and precious gems. It was a tall standard crowned with a glittering wreath which surrounded the sacred monogram. This standard (*labarum*) was perhaps the first processional cross.

Tradition credits Constantine's mother St. Helena with the discovery in Jerusalem of the buried cross of Jesus during the second quarter of the 4th century. Immediately this relic became the object of tender devotion and lavish ritual. The pilgrim nun Egeria has left us a vivid account of the ritual for exposition and the procession to venerate the cross on Good Friday in Jerusalem. The true cross became a nexus of holiness, sacred presence and healing. Egeria even writes of one overzealous devotee caught biting off a chunk of the cross during the liturgy!

The Fathers of the Church loved to find in every reference to wood or tree, staff, rod or ark in the Hebrew Scriptures a type of the cross of Christ. Cyril of Jerusalem declares, "Life ever comes from wood!" Paulinus of Nola chants to the cross, "You have become for us a ladder for us to mount to heaven." And in an anonymous Easter homily inspired by Hippolytus, the tree of the cross reverses the destruction wrought by the tree of Eden:

For me this tree is a plant of eternal  
health. I feed on it; by its roots I am  
rooted; by its branches I spread myself;  
I rejoice in its dew; the rustling of its leaves  
invigorates me...I freely enjoy its fruits  
which were destined for me from the  
beginning. It is my food when I am  
hungry, a fountain for me when I am  
thirsty; it is my clothing because its leaves  
are the spirit of life. (Pascha IV)

The first evidence of the cross in a Christian procession is found in Constantinople. In about 385 John Chrysostom, outraged by the boisterous nocturnal parading of the Arians, organized grand torchlight processions for orthodox believers. Crowds of chanting Christians carried silver crosses to which lighted wax tapers had been attached. The effect must have been brilliant. Still, vicious brawls broke out between the two parties, and in the end the emperor forbade the Arians any further public display.

The poetic intuition of the Fathers found beautiful expression in the splendid processional hymns of Venantius Fortunatus. The *Pange Lingua* written to celebrate the reception of relics of the true cross by Queen Radegunde at Poitiers in 569 addresses the cross directly:

Faithful cross, O Tree all beauteous  
Tree all peerless and divine!  
Not a grove on earth can show us  
Such a leaf and flower as thine.

The lovely *Vexilla Regis* hails the cross as a triumphant emblem of victory:

The royal banners forward go,  
The cross shines forth in mystic glow,  
Where he as man who gave us breath,  
Now bows beneath the yoke of death.

During the 6th century we hear of handcrosses (these were perhaps small reliquaries) carried by Church dignitaries. And Venerable Bede tells us in his *History* that when Augustine of Canterbury and his companions landed in England in 596, they processed into the presence of King Ethelbert with "a silver cross for their banner."

By the end of the 7th century Jerusalem's style of veneration of the cross for Good Friday had spread westward, and we find at Rome an elaborate procession in which a barefoot deacon carried the wood of the cross in a gold reliquary richly ornamented with precious stones. Processing with the relic of the cross was understood as accompanying Christ to Jerusalem. Relics of the cross were widely distributed, and Good Friday veneration spread north.

Meanwhile in the East John Damascene ardently defended the Church's official attitude toward the symbol of the cross during the Iconoclastic Controversy:

This truly precious and august tree  
is to be worshipped as sanctified  
by contact with his holy body and blood...  
Moreover we worship even the image of  
the precious and life-giving Cross, not  
honoring the tree but the image as a  
symbol of Christ. The tree of life which  
was planted by God in Paradise  
prefigured this precious cross.  
(Exposition of Orthodox Faith)

In a papal ceremonial of the early 9th century there is mention of a number of crosses to be carried behind the pontiff by his servants. But it is Charlemagne himself who in 800 presented Pope Leo III with a magnificent jeweled cross to be used specifically for leading the spring litany processions that moved from church to church through the city. When the procession arrived at the church where the

Eucharist was to be celebrated, this cross was set up beside the altar. The idea of stational crosses for processions soon became popular in all the Roman parishes. Charlemagne most likely brought to Rome a custom that was already well established in France.

By the end of the 9th century two versions of the processional cross exist: the ordinary hand-held cross without a pole used for any religious procession and the cross-staff reserved for archbishops. This cross-staff was to be carried before these prelates within their own provinces. In sculpture, paintings and mosaics archbishops were usually portrayed holding this cross-staff in their left hand as a sign of office and the crozier in their right symbolic of their pastoral care. The cross-staff was common by the 11th century. The processional cross as we know it today - a cross or crucifix surmounting a pole - clearly traces its origins to the cross-staff.

Very often the cross itself could be removed from the staff and fixed into a stand to be used as the altar cross. This was a matter of convenience since by the 13th century Innocent III had prescribed that the cross be placed upon the altar for the celebration of the Eucharist. By this time processional crosses were for the most part true crucifixes.

The almost universal use of the processional cross by the early medieval period is witness to the importance of the Good Friday processions and veneration as well as to the influence of courtly ritual on the unfolding liturgical practices. The cross as the official insignia that led a procession recalled the dignity of courtly pageantry as well as the solemnity and sacred presence of the Good Friday processions.

In the entrance rite of the Eucharistic Liturgy the processional cross leads us to the holy place where we will be fed on Word and Sacrament. The foundational document *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* recommends that this cross be placed "differently" in the sanctuary space "according to the celebration and other environmental factors." The processional cross is a living, movable symbol, never static. It takes up its place, presides over the liturgical space, is honored with incense, demands our attention and reverence. If as the ritual requires, there is to be one cross for the worshipping assembly, the processional type is the preferred form.

When we carry the cross at the beginning of liturgical processions, we take up our cross as Jesus instructed us. We are his body, following in his footsteps. The cross is at once the sign of our victory in Christ over all the powers of sin and death and an awesome sign of the privilege and challenge of our vocation as other Christs.

We are implicated by the cross of Christ as we gather in its shadow. Together beneath the cross we are stained with the blood that falls from its arms and so committed to offer ourselves to one another and to the Father in the Spirit with the extravagant generosity of Christ crucified. We must "go and do likewise."

As the cross passes through our midst in procession we are reminded of the upside-downness of our life in the Kingdom where the poor are set on thrones and the hungry are filled, where lions sleep with lambs and babies play near cobras' dens, where barren wives bear children and virgins like Mary are made wonderfully fruitful, where the awesome humility of God is made flesh in Christ and embraces and transforms the contradiction of suffering and death.

The cross is our perfect Kingdom-symbol, for God is the God of reversals. The cross once symbol of death is for us a symbol life and love, hope and freedom. With Christ all of our crosses and dyings have

been reversed and made into gateways to new life and resurrection. And so we rally in joy around the cross, the wisdom and power of God's marvelous "foolishness."

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