

Should our parish have a crucifix or a cross?

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM), first issued in 1969, prescribes that there should be a cross in every church, visible to the people during the celebration of Mass (2002 GIRM 308). It is very appropriate that such an image be prominent in every church for, as St. Paul reminds us, we “should glory in the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal 6:14).

Our faith, moreover, reminds us that Christ’s death on the cross led to his resurrection, and that the tears of Good Friday should lead to the joy of Easter Sunday. The tradition of the Church has been to keep the tension between Christ’s death and resurrection always present to us and to see the cross as an instrument of death as well as a means to glory. In referring to the cross, the preface for the feast of Triumph of the Holy Cross proclaims that “the tree of man’s defeat became his tree of victory; where life was lost, there life has been restored.”

Christ is truly risen! But his resurrection occurred because of his death on the cross, and the risen Lord who appeared to Thomas eight days after the resurrection showed Thomas the still-present wounds of his crucifixion (Jn 20:27). The paschal mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection is a reality we continue to experience through the joys and sorrows, successes and failures, laughter and tears, of our day to day lives.

The 1969 GIRM made no reference to any “corpus” on the cross. As a result, some churches crafted contemporary versions of the “*crux gemmata*” (jeweled cross) common in some places before the twelfth century. The 2002 edition of the GIRM explicitly states that the cross used at Mass is to have “the figure of Christ crucified upon it” (2002 GIRM 308). Such a reference to the image of the crucified Lord on a cross also appeared in the Missal used before the liturgical revisions of the 1960s. The image of our Savior is a reminder that at the core of our faith is the person of Jesus Christ, God’s Word made flesh, who on the cross shed his blood “for all, so that sins may be forgiven.”

The GIRM makes no other specification about the figure on the cross. Over the years, there

have been various artistic traditions about how to portray the Lord, including using images of Christ vested in triumph as King of Creation. Such traditional depictions are in no way prohibited.

Although the GIRM in the 2002 Missal has been carefully edited to include references to an image of Christ on the cross used at Mass, no such changes in the text were introduced in the rubrics for Good Friday regarding the Adoration of the Holy Cross. This Good Friday rite takes its origin from the veneration of the actual wood of Christ’s cross in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, and the liturgical texts given in the Missal for this rite themselves focus on the “wood of the cross.” Thus, in some places, it is customary on Good Friday to use a barren cross, rather than one with the Lord’s image on it. The 2002 Missal does not prohibit this practice from continuing and, in fact, the document “Built of Living Stones,” approved by the U.S. Bishops in 2000, explicitly permits the use of either a barren cross or a crucifix on Good Friday (n. 83).

We begin and end Mass with the sign of the cross. For Christians, the image of the cross speaks of many different things. It speaks of hope, rejection, love, glory, and triumph. Ultimately, it speaks of Jesus, God’s gift in love to our world, “so that whoever believes in [Christ] may not die, but may have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

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