

When Catholics and Protestants have opportunities to talk about their Christian faith, at some point the topic will turn to the crucifix versus the cross. The Protestant argument usually ends (or sometimes begins) with the words - "but don't you know that Christ was raised from the dead?"

Apart from the fact that, yes, we know that, we believe that with all of hearts. That particular question does not really address the real issue.

In a few such conversations I confess that I have defaulted to an equally inane response. "Well, if you really want to celebrate the fact that Jesus rose from the dead, why don't you wear an empty tomb around your neck?"

By the way, a few years ago I did a web search and found a company called Empty Tomb Jewelry. Case closed!

Seriously though, the issue of the cross and the crucifix is one that points to an important point. The cross has absolutely no significance apart from the One who hung upon it the first Good Friday. Countless lives were lost on the cross over a large span of time. It was the "torture of choice" for the Romans and yet those deaths did not give rise to any embrace of this image.

In his meditations for the Way of the Cross, which he wrote while still a cardinal in 1976, Blessed John Paul II says, "'They have pierced my hands and feet, I can count all my bones.' (Ps 22:16-17).

"'I can count...' How prophetic were these words! And yet we know that this body is a ransom. The whole of this body, its hands, its feet, its every bone, is a priceless ransom. The Whole Man is in a state of utmost tension: his bones, his muscles, his nerves, his every organ and every cell, is stretched and strained to breaking-point. 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.' (Jn 12:32)

"These words express the full reality of the crucifixion. And part of this reality is the terrible tension penetrating Christ's hands, feet and every bone: driving its way into the entire body which, nailed like a mere thing to the beams of the Cross, is about to be utterly annihilated in the convulsive agony of death.

"And the whole of the world, which Jesus wills to draw to himself, enters into the reality of the Cross. The world is dependent on the gravitational pull of this body, which inertia now causes to sink lower and lower."

On Good Friday we venerate this cross - a word that means honor, esteem, adoration, or regard very highly. Yet, the liturgy betrays the reason. "Behold the wood of the Cross on which hung the salvation of the world."

The cross alone is a wonderful Christian symbol, but leaves no challenge to the beholder. Crosses are worn by people of all walks of life and all conditions of life. It has become an item of adornment as well as a Christian symbol. The scandal begins when Salvation is hung upon it.

The crucifix calls people to a decision. a decision about the Lord Jesus Christ, who hung upon the Cross, becoming the salvation of the world. People must choose what to do about Him, whether to accept His death and, with it, the fullness of all that He revealed, or to reject Him.

A nineteenth century Baptist evangelist, D.L. Moody, captured the heart of this confrontation in a sermon entitled "What Think Ye of Christ?" He guided his hearers through a series of interviews, including those who were present for His passion and death. To each one - the Pharisees, Caiaphas, Pilate, Judas, the Centurion at the cross, the Apostles - he asked the key question, "What think ye of Christ?" Each one answered in kind.

The crucifix continues to call us, Catholic, Protestant, and all the sorts and conditions of humanity, to respond. Our response should not just be based on what is found in our liturgies, but more importantly what is found in our hearts. It is there, in the very core of our being that the question must be settled.

When speaking to 7,000 young Catholics in the Archdiocese of Madrid two years before World Day in 2011, the Holy Father declared, "Christ defeated sin and death by the total giving of Himself. For this reason, we must embrace and adore the Lord's cross, make it our own, accept its weight as Simon of Cyrene did, in order to participate in the only thing that can redeem all of humanity."

On the Good Friday before his death, Blessed John Paul II was too weak to attend the liturgy. He sent the faithful a personal message, which, in part, said, "The adoration of the Cross directs us to a commitment that we cannot shirk: the mission that St Paul expressed in these words: 'In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church' (Col 1:24).

"I also offer my sufferings so that God's plan may be completed and his Word spread among the peoples. I, in turn, am close to all who are tried by suffering at this time. I pray for each one of them.

"On this memorable day of Christ's crucifixion, I look at the Cross with you in adoration, repeating the words of the liturgy: 'O crux, ave spes unica!' Hail, O Cross, our only hope, give us patience and courage and obtain peace for the world!"

What do we think of Christ? What place does He really occupy in our lives? How profoundly does His passion, death, resurrection, and revelation impact me?

During Lent the Church visits the Christ's Passion and Death through the Stations of the Cross. Each each station the minister says, "We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you." To which we respond, "Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world."

This is why we don't wear an empty tomb around our necks. Resurrection without a Redeemer is merely a restoration of life. When the cross is added, it is for the life of the world!

Always on Good Friday we hear the Passion according to Saint John. Because it is so long we can sometimes begin to skip listening to it or reading it or even thinking about it. The Passion Narrative is a strong story for us to hear. We need to meditate on death very profoundly. This is not simply the story of a rather foolish man who sort of got himself into trouble with the Roman authorities of his time and so was put to death. Instead, if we are to believe the Gospel writers, this is the story of a man who chose to die so that we might live.

The Good Friday Passion has to be understood in the light of the first two readings. The reading from the Prophet Isaiah reminds us that we can imagine people who are willing to give their lives for others. Probably some of us have known people willing to give their lives for others. It is a much rarer occurrence to meet someone who is willing to give his or her life for someone that they do not know. Rarer yet is the person willing to give his or her life for someone who has harmed them. Good Friday invites us to meditate on our own willingness to give up our lives. For whom are we willing to die? Are we willing to follow Jesus and give ourselves for all others, even those who reject us and hate us and despise us? This is today's invitation and challenge.

The second reading, from the letter to the Hebrews, reminds us that we only learn life's lessons through suffering—and most of the time we are

quite busy trying to find ways to escape suffering. Again, we are invited to meditate on our personal relationship with suffering and how we accept sufferings that we cannot avoid.

These two introductory readings help us understand the Gospel narrative of the Passion of our Lord, who was willing to die for others and who learned His own obedience by what He suffered in this life.

There is no way to deny the strength of the Gospel narratives which speak so clearly of the divinity of Jesus. This God become man willingly embraces death for us. It is the “for us” that is so powerful. Christ is born for us, Christ lived for us, Christ died for us. Jesus wants us all to have life and to have it abundantly. Jesus wants us to share in the divine life. The more deeply we study the texts of the Gospels, the more we will become convinced that Jesus is God who now gives His life for us.

Let us be in silence now before this mystery of God’s immense love for us. Let us try to comprehend just a small bit this love for us. May our acceptance of God’s love inspire us to love others and give our lives for them. Christ dies. May we die in Him to all that separates us from God and from one another.

It is in St. John's account of the Passion of Jesus that we see, in stark relief, both Jesus' humanity and his divinity. We also get a very hard look at

the human nature of the men Jesus chose to be His closest confidantes and the leaders of His Church. And if we ever needed confirmation of human cowardice, all we have to do is look at one very central figure in the drama that was Jesus' suffering and death.

We believe as a dogma of the faith that Jesus Christ was both human and Divine. He knew who he was and he understood the purpose for which He had come. He alludes to that reality all through the Gospels, and most of the time, the Twelve don't seem to "get it," it was almost as though they didn't believe that all of this talk of suffering and death until the reality of what Jesus was telling them began to come to pass. Jesus knew they were weak, just as he knows that we in our humanity *are weak*. Jesus was ready to forgive all of them, just as he is ready to forgive all of us.

When the temple guards came to arrest Jesus, he identified himself as God when he asked "who are you looking for" and the guards said "Jesus the Nazarene" and he answered "I AM." The Gospel says they turned away and fell to the ground. They did this because Jesus had used the Divine Name to refer to himself, a name that they had all been taught that no human being should utter so flagrantly in public, that only God could speak it so freely...and God was placed under arrest that night.

Often we hear people in the world speak of the leaders of our Church as hypocrites, and that may be the lightest charge we hear leveled. Sometimes we ourselves might be frustrated at Church leaders for some reason or other, and in our sincere faith, we don't understand why they are allowing *this* or *that* to go on, or we might ask ourselves "why do they allow *such* and *such* to go on" or even "why doesn't Pope Francis do something about \_\_\_\_\_." When we think in this way, we need to remember that not only did Jesus not promise us perfect leaders, we are given a clear



example in the Passion accounts that our very first bishops, the Apostles, were just as weak and prone to sin and betrayal as we are, because the Gospel tells us that the Apostles ran away and hid like cowards. Just as Jesus had foretold, Peter denied him three times rather than be accused and suffer with Jesus...think about that for a moment, the *Pope* denied Jesus rather than die as he did. Yet we know that the risen Lord embraced and forgave Peter, and he didn't say to him "you can't lead the Church anymore, you denied me, sorry." The reason for this forgiveness is because Peter was sorrowful, but he never doubted Jesus' love and mercy enough to take his life.

Judas was the saddest case of all of the Twelve, but not because he was the one who betrayed Jesus. Someone had to hand Jesus over in the end, and it would have been someone close to the Lord. Judas is such a sad figure because unlike Peter, Judas despaired of God's mercy, he gave into that temptation of Satan which says "you don't deserve to be forgiven for the horrible thing you did, so why then do you think God is going to forgive you, you are responsible for all of this." Judas gave into that attack of despair and hung himself. He never gave Jesus the chance to forgive him and to restore him to life in Christ. Had he done so, we might speak of him very differently today.

And then we have the ultimate example of moral relativism-Pontius Pilate. I have often believed that Pilate, were he among us today, might be something of a popular character among a certain crowd in today's society.

When he questions Jesus and asks him "so you are a king..." Jesus responds "you say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is committed to the truth hears my voice." (cf. [Jn. 18:37](#)).

Jesus makes clear that he has come to bear witness to the truth. He has already declared himself to be “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (cf. [John 14:6](#)) and now he tells Pilate that he has come into the world to testify to the truth... to bear witness to it.

Jesus is stating that there is such a thing as truth, and he is a testimony to what this truth is. Pilate’s reaction is virtually the same as much of today’s world when they are presented with the reality of the Gospel...”What is Truth? (cf. [John 18:38](#)).

It is very reminiscent of today’s moral relativism, wherein even some of our friends and family members, when presented with the reality of the Truth of Christ, or the Church, or the moral law, they will say “well, that is true for you but not for me” or “that is your truth but it isn’t everyone else’s truth.”

This is a fallacy. Either what Jesus was telling us about himself and his mission is true, or it is not true, it cannot be true for some but not others. When we accept that false notion, as Pilate apparently does in the Gospel, we are denying that such a thing as truth even exists, and we are accepting moral relativism as a basic reality of how to live.

Relativism is always a cop out. Usually those who profess such a relativistic attitude *know* the truth, and they know what is right and just, they simply do not wish to be inconvenienced or have to sacrifice for the sake of what is right. The evidence suggests that this is most certainly true of Pilate. He knew that Jesus had been brought to him based on charges that were trumped up, and Jesus’ trial was not even valid according to Jewish law. As the Roman Procurator, Pilate had the absolute power of life and death in the Province of Judaea, and he knew that Jesus was an innocent man. He had the authority to say “enough of your customs, this man has done nothing wrong, and I’m not going to stand for this,” that was well within his power. Instead, he let the hostile crowd decide because he was afraid of having to deal with an insurrection, something the Jewish people in Judaea had become known for even by that time. Rather than stand for

what he knew to be true, Pilate let fear rule the day and let a hostile crowd decide that they would rather release an insurrectionist named Barabbas than Jesus who is called Christ.

Pilate did perform one invaluable service, however. Jesus Christ was, and is, our Passover Lamb. The Passover Lamb that was sacrificed and eaten had to be inspected to insure that it was without fault, without blemish, otherwise the Lamb was not suitable for the Passover. Pilate inspected our Passover Lamb for us, and what did he say? "I find no fault in Him." (cf. [Jn. 19:6](#)) Just as they ate the Passover Lamb in the Old Covenant, so we are given the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world to eat in the New Covenant. Happy are those called to the Supper of the Lamb. Amen.