

Good Friday Veneration of the Cross

By Jim Seghers

There is misguided trend to eliminate the corpus from the cross that is venerated on Good Friday. This stems in part from a superficial reading of the liturgical prayers used during the Good Friday observance and from a lack of understanding of the underlining Latin texts that are being translated into English. It is also based on an inadequate understanding of this ancient rite and current Church law.

"The earliest examples of the veneration of the cross all focused upon a **relic of the true cross**, the practice eventually arose of using images of the cross in churches that did not possess such a relic."¹ The ninth-century liturgist Amalarius attests to this practice:

*Although every church cannot possess it [the true cross], yet the virtue of the holy cross is not wanting to them in those crosses which are made after the likeness of the Lord's cross.*²

In order to achieve a "likeness of the Lord's cross" the crucifix was introduced into the Good Friday liturgy. A crucifix is a cross with an image of the crucified corpus of Christ fastened upon it. Although this use of the crucifix is an ancient tradition it is difficult to pinpoint when the practice began. Part of the difficulty is caused by the fact that the Latin term *crux* (cross) is frequently used in liturgical books to designate the crucifix. One example of this is the *Roman Missal* of Pius V. "Nonetheless, the crucifix had already begun to appear in the Good Friday Veneration ceremony in some places by the end of the eleventh century."³

The interchangeable use of the Latin word *crux* (cross) with *crucifixi* (crucifix) is also affirmed in the *Constitutions of Lanfranc*, Archbishop of Canterbury. The word *crux* is used repeatedly, but the reference to kissing the cross is "*osculetur pedes crucifixi*" (shall kiss the feet of the crucifix).

Subsequent history continued the tradition of using the crucifix during the Good Friday ceremony. The *Missale Mixtum* of Spain's Mozarabic Rite, which dates from 1500, twice uses the term *crucifixus* (crucifix) in describing the cross for Good Friday. The *Caeremoniale Episcoporum* (The Bishop's Ceremonial) of 1886, which was first issued in 1600, has a similar usage, as does the 1853 edition of the *Memoriale Rituum*, which was first published in 1725.

In the present century the 1960 edition of the *Roman Missal* specifies that a "sufficiently large cross should be used, with a figure of the Crucified." However, in the Roman Missal of Pope Paul VI (1970) and in the *Caeremoniale Episcoporum* of 1985 the term *crux* is used. Does this use of *crux* (cross) indicate a change in Church law, which now permits the use of a cross without the *corpus*? The answer is no for two reasons. First it is traditional to use the Latin *crux* in liturgical documents to mean a crucifix. Secondly, the 1985 edition of the *De Benedictionibus*, an official book of blessings forming part of the *Rituale Romanum*, affirms "that it is particularly 'fitting' that crosses with the image of the body of Jesus crucified affixed to the wood be used for public veneration in churches. Thus the crucifix remains the preferred form of in the judgment of the Church, and indeed, there are sound pastoral reasons for continuing this time-honored tradition."⁴

Regarding pastoral reasons Albert F. Kaiser, CPPS develops the following ideas. We live in an age when the ignominious form of execution called crucifixion is long forgotten. In addition the awesome significance of Jesus' passion and death is not understood by many. In this context an empty cross runs the risk of

¹ James Monti, *The Week of Salvation: History and Traditions of Holy Week*, p. 233.

² *De Ecclesiasticis Officiis*, Liber I, Caput XIV.

³ Monti, *Ibid.*

⁴ Monti, *Ibid.* p. 235.

becoming an empty and ambiguous symbol. However, the crucifix confronts us with the "scandal of the cross" in the fullest sense and challenges us to make a choice.⁵

August 19, 1999

⁵ "The Historical Backgrounds and Theology of Mediator Dei: Part I: Backgrounds," *American Ecclesiastical Review*, Dec. 1953, p. 378.