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Art in the Early Church: The Empty Cross and Images of Christ

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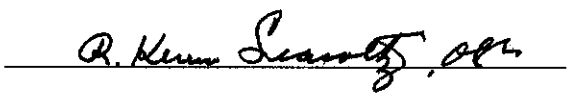

R. Kevin Seasoltz, O.S.B.

RESEARCH DISCLOSURE

Art in The Early Church:
The Empty Cross and Images of Christ

The cross or the crucifix – which is older? Convinced that the representation and veneration of the cross itself is an older, more authentic and venerable tradition than that of the crucifix, my goal was to trace the evolution of the image of the cross in the context of early Christian art: the first examples of the cross, the early images of Christ, and the first depictions of Christ on the cross. This essay considers the historical, social, and theological contexts for such images, and several theories to explain why the cross was for so long represented without Christ upon it. It begins with a consideration of early Christian communities and the *terminus a quo* or first manifestations of Christian iconography, and examines the three centuries before the reign of Constantine: the first two centuries of the post-Apostolic Church that leave barely an artistic trace, and the following century that reveals the first evidence of artistic development.

The early history of the cross reflects the history of the Early Church. There prove to be many reasons for the absence of representations of Christ Crucified in the Early Church: cultural, political, social, artistic, and theological; and the subsequent history and development of the crucifix represent major shifts in theology, religious sensibility, spirituality, and mystical language. It is the cross indeed, unadorned by his corpus, that is the more ancient symbol of Christ.

Catherine Combs-Donovan

March 22, 2003

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I. INTRODUCTION

They give him back his clothing and bring him the cross.
"Hail!" says Jesus. "O Cross that I have long desired!"
And you, Christian, gaze on it and tremble! O what a solemn moment
Is the one when Christ, for the first time, accepts the eternal Cross!
O consummation that day of the tree in Paradise!
Look, sinner, and see what your sin has wrought.
No more crime without a God upon it, and no more cross without Christ!
Indeed the misery of man is great, but we have nothing to say,
For now God is upon it, come not to explain, but to fulfill.[1]

Paul Claudel

"And no more cross without Christ!" In the poetry and piety of the early twentieth century, still alive today, the image of the body of Christ upon the cross is central and believed by many to have originated in earliest Christianity. In the twenty-first century, the newly revised *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* now mandates that the cross carried in the entrance procession for the Eucharistic liturgy be adorned with the figure of the crucified Christ.[2] In heated episcopal debates, some bishops have expressed the view that the cross venerated on Good Friday should also be a crucifix rather than simply a cross, and many Roman Catholics believe the crucifix to be the oldest and most authentic representation of Christ. But is it? For almost three hundred years after his death and resurrection, Christ was – with a few rare exceptions – never depicted on the cross.[3] The cross, when rendered, was empty.

I am convinced that the representation and veneration of the cross itself— symbol of the triumph of Christ— is an older, more authentic and venerable tradition than that of the crucifix. In order to illustrate that thesis, this essay will trace the evolution of the image of the cross in the context of early Christian art: the first examples of the cross, the early images of Christ, and the first depictions of Christ on the cross. It will consider the historical, social, and theological contexts for such images, and several theories to explain why the cross was for so long represented— and venerated — without Christ upon it. Preliminary statements will be made

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[1] Paul Claudel, *Le chemin de la croix*, "Second Station" *The Way of the Cross*, trans. mine, 1999 (Paris: Librairie de l'Art Catholique, 1918), 6.

[2] *The Roman Missal: Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani; An English Language Study Translation* Secretariat for the Liturgy (Washington: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), 122.

[3] There exist three small earlier examples: two intaglios and one seal, which are discussed below.

concerning early Christian communities and the *terminus a quo* or first manifestations of Christian iconography. I will examine the three centuries before the reign of Constantine: the first two centuries of the post-Apostolic Church that leave barely an artistic trace, and the following century that reveals the first evidence of artistic development by means of symbol and metaphor.

II. PRE-CONSTANTINIAN PERIOD

A. The Beginnings of Christian Iconography

The Absence of Christian Art before 200

For roughly 170 years (A.D. 30 to 200) no art and barely any material evidence of distinctively Christian subjects have been found.[4] One must be careful not to confuse absence of evidence with negative evidence; not knowing if a thing exists is different from knowing that it does not. Evidently, however, the followers of Jesus created nothing materially their own, outside of written texts, until the early 3rd century. Other religious groups whose beliefs are documented in literature (e.g. Gnostics and Essenes) likewise left no evident imprint on their material environs.[5]

In most places before 200, Christians were still a small and relatively insignificant minority with no external markers and no distinctive cultural traits. They had no particular ethnic identity, language, dress, land, government, economy, art, or diet.[6] By contrast to the Jews whose right to exist and practice their religion in the Greco-Roman culture was acknowledged, Christians were indistinct and inconspicuous. Although their communities were defined by their shared beliefs and resources, their membership, and their ritual behavior, Christians could only be recognized by an outsider if they publicly admitted their identity, or if they refused to worship the gods and Caesar. Lacking land and capital, the early Christians apparently produced no art or architecture.

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[4] There are possibly some very early examples of the cross, see page 11.

[5] Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 131.

[6] See *Epistle to Diognetus* 5,1 in William A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 3 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1970), 40. Some distinguished themselves by refusing to eat meat sacrificed to pagan gods.

But despite frequent persecutions, their adaptative qualities led to their survival and to remarkable success in establishing their own separate and distinct cultural identity.[7] This religious culture materially defined itself as it began to acquire land in which to bury its dead, in the Roman hypogea, the underground burial chambers in the environs of the city, or in the catacombs. Many Christians were wealthy enough to purchase sarcophagi and to ornament their burial places, and it is within that context that the first public expression of Christian art appears. This reflects a burgeoning Christian iconographic tradition just as Christians were on the verge of breaking into the mainstream of Roman society. Indeed, the burgeoning Christian art, when it can be seen as distinctively Christian at all, is a sign that they really were making their way into society at large. [8]

The Emergence of Christian Art: 200 to 300

The distinctly Christian iconography did not emerge full-blown but rather is the offspring of its parents, the already existing Greco-Roman material culture and the more rare Judaic art. Selective adaptation by harmonization and not by syncretistic or indiscriminate assimilation is a good interpretative model for evaluating the emergence of distinctly Christian art forms around 200.[9] The earliest epigraphic witness to this model of adaptation is the treatise of Clement of Alexandria entitled *The Teacher*, addressed to baptized Christians around 200.[10] In the purchase of seals, he urges them to pick carefully and choose already-existing symbols that may be interpreted with Christian meanings: dove, fish, lyre, ship, and anchor, but not idols, bows, swords, drinking cups, and lovers. He advises them to adapt and discourages the commissioning of novelties. Yet a few Christians must have done just that, for the earliest extant images of Christ on the cross, shockingly innovative, were etched on three seals or intaglios, now in the British Museum, dated to the late second or early third century.[11]

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[7] One of the hypotheses for the disappearance of the Essene community of Qûmran is precisely their lack of adaptability.

[8] L. Michael White, in "From Jesus to Christ," PBS and WGBH/Frontline (1998) accessed on 11/25/01 at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/first/catacombs.html.

[9] Finney, 132.

[10] Clement of Alexandria, *Pedagogos*, Book III, chap. XI (*post* A.D. 202). Accessed 12/04/01 at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02093.htm.

[11] These small objects of personal piety are the only extant pre-Constantinian documents depicting the crucifixion. Finney, 112.

The first images of Christ, the Word of God, were the word images in the Gospels. Visual translations of the verbal imagery of the Bible first appeared as written letter- and word-signs. For example, the five letters of the word *Icthus,* which in Greek means fish, form an acronym-acrostic and are in fact the initial letters of five other Greek words, *IXΘYΣ,* meaning: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. This visual pun carried a weight of images: the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (Mark 6:34-44), the waters of Baptism, the risen Christ on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias (John 21), the apostles as fishers of men (Mark 1:17, Luke 5:10).[12] One encounters this earliest of all images, as well as those above encouraged by Clement, on seals and amulets, and on clay oil lamps. Another, more abstract letter-sign is *XP,* the first two letters of the Greek *Khristos* , transliterated as *chi rho,* and often placed between *alpha* and *omega* as a monogram of Christ. The *x* turned sideways forms a cross.

Art in Early Gathering Places

Although no large-scale Christian buildings before 313 have survived intact, such buildings must have existed in major centers of population, despite the periodic destruction and confiscation of property to which Christians were subject during times of persecution. Throughout the Roman Empire, Christians met from the beginning to celebrate Eucharist in remembrance, to baptize, to sing hymns, to hear readings, and to listen to sermons, following Jesus' assurance that "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:20) Most of these meetings seem to have taken place in private rooms. How were these meeting/worship spaces decorated? One can conjecture that they were probably painted with typical Late Roman 'religious' images, mostly biblical like those of their Jewish counterparts discovered at the synagogue of Dura-Europos. The only extant example is that of the 'house-church' discovered at Dura-Europos in Syria, on the Euphrates. Typical of the other neighborhood houses, it had been converted to serve as a church in 240. This is attested to by an assembly hall with a raised platform, and an identifiable baptistery furnished with a large canopied font and adorned with wall paintings of Christian narrative scenes--two Old Testament and six New Testament--above it and around the room. A coin, found on one of the soldiers buried in the rubble, dates the battle with the Persians that caused the demise of the town to the

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[12] Erika Langmuir, "Sign and Symbol," *The Image of Christ,* Gabriele Fenaldi, ed. (London: National Gallery Company Limited, 2000), 10.

year 256.[13] The discoveries of frescoes at both the 'house-church' and the synagogue of Dura-Europos have shaken the long-held belief that there was no Christian art due to a prohibition against graven images in Judaism.[14]

By 300 there is evidence that halls were built and used for worship, but these are known primarily from accounts of their destruction or orders for their reconstruction.[15] Modest 'church-houses' were undoubtedly replaced with grander structures, though little remains of their pre-Constantinian form and decoration. One theory is that the earliest phases of church art and architecture may have been lost because they fell victim to Christianity's later popularity, what John Lowden calls "the paradox of success."[16]

In the pre-Constantinian period, it seems that Christians were not immediately in a position to make bold public statements about their religion through art or architecture, except in a funerary context. After the burning of Rome in A.D. 64, Christians were constrained to the greatest prudence in the manifestation of their cult and the affirmation of their faith.[17] In this atmosphere of caution, the faith of Christians was expressed by symbols and conventional signs found mostly in the context of catacombs. The reason for the survival of these cemeteries was a legislative one: Roman law regarded burials as sacrosanct so that even during times of persecutions Christian tombs were left mostly untouched.

Early Imagery: Symbols and Metaphor

The images that decorated these early gathering places were often adaptations of classical imagery.[18] Christian artists were greatly inspired by Greco-Roman figurative models, reinterpreted in light of Scripture and according to theological and liturgical needs. The earliest Christian pictorial art created to adorn walls and ceilings of religious spaces selectively adapted traditional pagan symbols to convey the hope of salvation, first with Old Testament stories before venturing to prototypes of Christ.[19] The content was clearly salvational or

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[13] Clark Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 139.
[14] Finney, 104.
[15] John Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1997), 18.
[16] Ibid., 24.
[17] Paul Thoby, *Le crucifix des origines au Concile de Trente* (Nantes: Bellanger, 1959), 11.
[18] Finney, 189-191.
[19] Ibid., 146-184.

soteriological.[20] The miraculous intervention of the saving power of God was represented in ways that Christians understood, illustrated in Old Testament stories such as those of Daniel and the two lions, and Jonah and the sea monster.[21] Shepherd, vine, philosopher—pagan images—were harmonized into metaphors of Christ.[22] On the walls, arches, and funerary plaques of the catacombs, one still finds images whose Christian interpretation could be understood by the initiated, e.g., a shepherd with a lamb in his arms evoking the Good Shepherd, and the peacock signifying the incorruptibility of Christ. Christ was often represented by symbolic actions, e.g. the phoenix rising from the ashes for his resurrection and the dove with the olive branch bringing his peace. A few scenes of his life were depicted, healing and miracle stories such as the raising of Lazarus and the curing of the paralytic, but infrequently his passion, very rarely his cross, and never his crucifixion!

For more than sixty years, the theories formulated by Krautheimer and Grabar[23] held sway: that Early Christian art initially modeled itself on images of the emperor. These theories offered support for the absence of the image of Christ crucified as incompatible with a royal image. Both Paul Corby Finney and Thomas E. Mathews disagree and postulate that the classical images of gods and emperors were bankrupt and not at all suited to imaging the Christian God, and that many images have been misinterpreted.[24] The one context in the Gospels in which Christ did wear imperial dress was the occasion of his mockery (Matthew 27: 28-29), and later Christians were persecuted for refusing to give homage to images of Caesar. Such imperial representation would therefore be contradictory. Close scrutiny of the images, which at first sight may appear to be based on imperial themes, proves them to be paradoxically different![25] After the conversion of Constantine, however, and the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in 391 by Theodosius I, we do see evidence of the "imperialization" of Christianity, and representations of a more imperial Jesus.[26] But other

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[20] Finney, 282.

[21] Ibid., 216.

[22] Ibid., 206.

[23] See André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968) and Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (Hartford: Yale University Press, 1984).

[24] Finney, 292, and Thomas E. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 179.

[25] See, for example, Jesus side-saddle on an ass like a woman rather than fully astride a horse, as any imperial figure would be, in Mathews, 33.

[26] L. Michael White, "From Jesus to Christ."

classic art was adapted and surprisingly transformed to represent the experience of the divine. The cross, one of the oldest symbols of the world and known in primitive as well as in advanced cultures, was not of Christian origin but would become the primary symbol and the principal motif of Christian iconography.[27]

Paul in his various letters frequently recalled the doctrine of the Cross, "but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1: 23); however, the image of Christ suffering on the cross was not visible in the growing Christian communities. Almost nowhere is early evidence of it found, not on the walls of homes, in the meeting rooms that served as churches, nor in the catacombs.[28] In order to understand one of the reasons for its absence, one must face the stark reality of what execution by crucifixion meant in that period of history.

B. The Cross

The Cross as Means of Execution

In order to situate the appearance of the cross as image and symbol in Christian art and worship, it is essential to place it materially in the very real context of the Roman practice of crucifixion. Crucifixion as capital punishment was remarkably widespread, both in the Roman and Greek-speaking worlds. Death by crucifixion was a horrific and degrading method of execution, reserved by the Romans for the lowest of criminals and for the perpetrators of the worst crimes, but rarely used for Roman citizens. In the Greek-speaking areas, it was punishment for slaves and peasants. Contemporary writers have attested to its cruelty, indignity and degradation; Cicero called it "that most cruel and disgusting penalty,"[29] and Josephus described crucifixion tersely and precisely as "the most wretched of deaths."[30] At the time of Paul and his contemporaries, Jews could see the Roman crosses erected throughout Palestine. A crucified Messiah, son of God, must have been a contradiction of terms to anyone, Jew, Greek, Roman or barbarian, asked to believe such a claim.[31]

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[27] T. Jerome Overbeck, "Cross," *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter E. Fink (Collegeville: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1990), 304..

[28] Thoby, 11.

[29] *DACL*, Tome 3, 3046. Cicero, *In Verrum*, 66: "*servitutis summum extremumque supplicium.*"

[30] Josephus, *Guerre des juifs/Josèphe*, trans. André Pelletier (Paris : Belles Lettres, 1975), 7.202ff. 203.

[31] Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia:Fortress Press, 1978), 10.

Death by crucifixion is impossible for us as early 21st -century Christians to imagine, for we have never witnessed its horror. Yet we are so accustomed to a crucifix hanging above our beds that we may have become immune to its original impact. A theologian asserts that Christianity and the cross with it "have been so sanitized, pasteurized, detoxified, bathed, scrubbed, and perfumed, so secularized and civilized that we take it for granted!"[32] To grasp the magnitude of the horror, one may read the vivid and profoundly shocking descriptions of the atrocious variations practiced by the executioners, the tortures that preceded it, and the agonies of death in Martin Hengel's book, *Crucifixion.*[33] Archaeological discoveries of crucified remains in Israel on Giv'at ha Mivtar (Ras el-Masaref) also provide mute and incontrovertible proof.[34] It is then hardly surprising that some Christians were led to espouse docetist views (Christ only 'appeared' to be human), for how could God truly suffer such ignominy?[35]

Until the Edict of Milan in 313, the gruesome reality of the crucifixion was before the eyes of most Christians. Not only were crosses planted all over the Empire, but Christians themselves were being executed on the cross, or at least threatened by crucifixion as possible punishment, particularly during the various persecutions until Diocletian (d. 306).[36] Though officially abolished by Constantine I in 337 out of respect for the death of Jesus, it did not disappear immediately. In spite of the abhorrence of its extreme cruelty by contemporary writers, crucifixion - and the fear of it - continued to be used as a deterrent to crime—a paradoxical attitude that is perhaps the precursor of the one that justifies the death penalty today.

The paradox of the Cross in the New Testament is represented by the Gospel concept of the cost of discipleship,[37] by Paul's adamant insistence on the total sufficiency of the cross as instrument of salvation, of death and of life. It is not the nails that held Christ to the cross, an unknown mystic says, but his love for humankind. Perhaps Christians needed no corpus in the

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[32] Sonya A. Quitslund, "The Cross and Discipleship" *Liturgy: The Holy Cross 1* (1980), 40.

[33] Hengel, *Crucifixion,* 22-32.

[34] J.H. Charlesworth, "Jesus and Jehohanan: An Archaeological Note on Crucifixion" *Expository Times* Edinburgh, volume IXXXIV No. 6. (February 1973), Accessed 11/25/01 at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/jesus/crucifixion.html.

[35] Joseph F. Kelly, "Docetism," *The Concise Dictionary of Early Christianity* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier / Liturgical Press, 1992), 46.

[36] Hengel, 32.

[37] An expanded meaning of "the cross of Christ" (1 Cor. 1:17) as sign of death and life may be the mark of anointing on the forehead of the baptized. See Étienne Nodet and Justin Taylor, *Origins of Christianity: An Exploration* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 435.

early centuries because that realization was still fresh in their minds and hearts.[38] A small cross—on a seal, on a sarcophagus, on a string—was enough. Or perhaps they preferred to avoid its reality, as we do today.

The Cross as Symbol of Christ

During this pre-Constantinian period, the cross was often represented mysteriously, depicted in a hidden way (*cruces dissimulatae.)* Again, it was in a funerary context that Christian images and symbols were first visible. In the catacombs next to the name of the deceased, a discreet cross was often hidden in the midst of the letters of the epitaph.

Only twenty clear representations of the cross are identified in the catacombs of Rome, but the symbol of the cross was often evoked by the most humble and varied cross-shaped objects: an anchor, a trident, an axe, a bird in flight. Seals of the 2nd century were etched with an anchor and fish or doves. The letter *tau* was commonly used, recalling the tau-shaped Roman cross (*crux patibulata)* then in use. The *tau* is found on 2nd century cemetery marbles, often intersecting names, or placed above or below. The cross was hidden in cryptograms and palindromes, the most famous of which is the Magic Square of St. Iraneus found in the excavations of Dura-Europos,[39] in Roman excavations in Great Britain, even on a column in Pompeii that is thought to pre-date the eruption of Vesuvius (79 CE)! This cryptogram re-appeared many times in subsequent centuries, in France and in Italy. *(See last page.)* It is tempting to believe that Christianity was an intentionally clandestine religion with a hidden God, communicated by secret signs, but several scholars make a convincing case to the contrary, attributing its obscurity to social, political and economic immaturity. As Christianity slowly emerged, so too did their invisible God.[40]

The Cross as Object of Prayer

The first allusion to the cross as an object of prayer is found in the apocryphal *Acts of John.*[41] Though a mid-second century docetic text, it is of historical value for both Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian refer to it. There it is written that John took a cross of wood and put it

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[38] Quitslund, 40.
[39] Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos,* 103.
[40] Finney, 287-293.
[41] *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles,* as quoted in Cyril E. Pocknee, *Cross and Crucifix* (London: A.R. Mowbray & Co., 1962), 36.

towards the east; he knelt before it and prayed. Tertullian (*c.* 200) wrote that while pagans worship images carved from wood, Christians prefer a plain wood cross. "A cross is, in its material, a sign of wood; amongst yourselves also the object of worship is a wooden figure. Only, while with you the figure is a wooden figure, with us the wood is its *own* figure."[42]

There may even be earlier evidence of the cross, though scholars disagree on whether it is a cross at all. An excavation at the site of Herculanum, also obliterated by the eruption of Vesuvius, uncovered what could be a small altar of prayer, or simply a shelf, above which is a cross-shaped niche carved into the wall. This possible representation of a cross would date to the 1st century and be, along with the Pompeian carving, the earliest evidence of such an inscription.[43]

Though the sign of the cross is not described as such in the New Testament, it is mentioned early in Christian history by Tertullian, who declared that "at every forward step and movement, at every going in and out . . . in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we mark upon our foreheads the sign."[44] Marking one's body with varying forms of this gesture was a Christian devotion in the Early Church that has endured to the present.

All this began to change, however, with the victory of Constantine I over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, in October of 312. What had often been a hidden symbol of Christ and those who followed him would now be visibly displayed on the *labarum* of the Roman soldiers. The cross, in all its forms, would no longer be dissimulated but triumphantly borne.

III. CONSTANTINIAN PERIOD

A. The Cross of Christ

Eusebius, in his *Vita Constantina,* wrote that Constantine attributed his conquest to the protection of the Christian God and placed the intersecting *XP*, symbol of Christ encircled by a

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[42] Tertullian, *Le premier livre Ad Nationes, de Tertullien,* trans. André Schneider (Institut Suisse de Rome, 1968), 13. Emphasis added.

[43] Thoby, 15-16.

[44] Tertullian, 3.

wreath, on the standards and shields of his soldiers.[45] The triumphal placement of this emblem of Christ led to the public acceptance of Christian symbols and the faith they depicted. The subsequent discovery of the true Cross by his mother Helena in 340 changed the cross from an object of repugnance to an object of devotion and piety.

According to early Christian tradition, St. Helena discovered Golgotha under the Emperor Hadrian's Temple of Venus and found three crosses buried there.[46] The one considered the "true cross" of Jesus was said to have been verifiable due to a miracle confirming its identity and to the still legible title inscribed on it.[47] Several early Church Fathers within the same century, Ambrose for example,[48] refer to her discovery and add to its veracity.[49] Thanks to her discoveries, the devotion to the True Cross, as a symbol both of Christ's death and of his victory over it, and to the places of the Holy Land would develop and flourish.

Constantine undertook a program for the building of vast churches both in Rome and in the holy places of Palestine, namely at the sites of the Crucifixion and the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the place of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Christian art flourished in the decoration of churches and in manuscripts, ivories, gold- and silver-smithing, and fabrics. The cross was now ornamented with gems or flowers, or kept plain to adorn the necks of the faithful, the top of churches, the doorways of private entrances, coins, diptychs, the imperial crown and scepter.

B. The Image of Christ

Symbol and Metaphor

Christ was first represented in symbolic, in metaphorical (e.g. the Good Shepherd), or in anonymous form (e.g. a philosopher), and then more concretely (e.g. as healer), but still with no distinguishing features. Jewish iconoclasm had prohibited the making of images, yet the synagogue paintings of Dura-Europos and the mosaics of Zippori in Israel offer evidence of early portraiture.[50] Scripture provided no physical description at all of Jesus and there was no authentic portrait tradition of Christ, but after Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, it became

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[45] *DACL*, Tome 8, 941. See Eusebius, *Vita Constantina* , ch. XXXI, 491. Accessed 11/26/01 at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/25021. htm.

[46] Overbeck, "Cross," 304.

[47] Rather curiously though, the commemoration of this event is known in French as *l'Invention de la vraie croix.*

[48] Ambrose, "Oratio in Obitu Theodos," in Overbeck,"Cross," 306.

[49] Overbeck, "Cross," 306.

[50] I saw these mosaics in Zippori, Israel, in the summer of 2001.

suddenly necessary to *imagine* Christ. Augustine would point to the imagination's need to concretize: "Even the physical face of the Lord is pictured with infinite variety by countless imaginations, though what ever it was like he certainly only had one."[51] But how were artists to portray him, since Christ's own self-portrait was "unimaginable mystery," "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8; 59), or "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14: 9)?[52]

The answer to that question would not only challenge artists but their response would also affect the way people would conceptualize Christ - art as liturgical theology.[53] Those works of art embody and partially express the theological content and the cultural context of the early period of the Church, revealing beliefs, attitudes, ideals, and emotional reactions to them.[54] The desire to portray Christ would be the subject of great controversy through the centuries, resolved only with the acceptance that any image of Christ is but an image of the Image.[55] Images are inadequate, but the answer is not to forbid them but "to multiply to infinity" the different visions of Christ as human expressions of the unimaginable theological concept.[56]

The Figure of Christ

Christianity graduated to a more public existence, and Christian art emerged from its chrysalis to emblazon in vivid color the apses and facades of churches.[57] Toward the end of the 4th century, the representations of Christ changed to show him standing in the midst of others, working miracles, or enthroned. His equality with God was emphasized and his divinity predominated, no doubt reflecting the Christological debates and the doctrinal developments of that period. By the end of the 4th century, large images of Christ, often surmounted by a triumphal cross, began to appear in the apses of churches, the oldest example that of the jeweled cross of St. Pudenziana in Rome.[58] Narrative iconography was executed in frescoes, mosaics

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[51] St. Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., (Brooklyn, N.Y.: New York City Press, 1991) book VIII, ch. 3, p. 246. quoted in Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 141.

[52] Mathews, 180.

[53] See more on this in Daniel Marguerat. "Ce qu'ils n'ont pas dit de Pâques," *Le Monde de la Bible* 125 (March-April 2001), 31-32.

[54] Richard Viladesau, 143.

[55] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 92.

[56] Neil MacGregor, "Introduction," *The Image of Christ*, 7.

[57] Mathews, 10.

[58] Thoby, 21.

and funerary carvings. Christ was often surprisingly presented clean-shaven and bearded in the same panels.[59] Some interpret these as examples of the polymorphism of Christ, a way of illustrating that one representation of God is inadequate. They are not portraits of Christ, but rather images of God, incarnate in the many facets of Christ. Eventually though, more literal representations of the Passion narratives emerged and occasional images of Christ crucified appear.

C. The Cross as Object of Veneration

After St. Helena's discoveries, the cult of the cross flourished and relics of the True Cross were being disseminated and venerated. Pilgrimages to sacred sites multiplied and Egeria recorded in her journals detailed descriptions of the celebration of the Adoration of the True Cross at Golgotha, *c.* 400.[60] She interestingly noted that deacons kept a close watch as the faithful kissed the Cross, for one intrepid pilgrim had bitten into it to keep a piece for himself! Good Friday celebrations included the Adoration of the Cross in those places where fragments of the True Cross were kept, in Antioch for example, and soon spread beyond the holy places.

The complaint of the emperor Julian "the Apostate" to the Christians, "You adore the wood of the cross and draw its likeness on your foreheads and engrave it on your house fronts," testifies to its use as an object of devotion and of Christian identity.[61] Nevertheless, if the cross was pictured everywhere, the crucifixion was not. Though dogmatic and sacramental treatises spoke profusely of the crucifixion, symbolic artistic references to it sufficed; the visual representations of Christ's suffering may still have been too disturbing or powerful if given concrete form.[62] Christ was often shown seated next to or below a cross, or carrying it, but not yet dying upon it. The cycles of the Passion were illustrated, but the cross was shown empty.

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[59] Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 113-114. For a fuller discussion of this topic, see her chapter "Portraits of the Incarnate God."

[60] *Itinerarium Egeriae* 37, trans. George E. Gingras, *Egeria: The Diary of a Pilgrim* [illegible]

D. Christ on the Cross

The first factual portrayal of the crucifixion is found starkly depicted on a small panel from an ivory casket, in the British museum and dated *c.* 400.[63] Christ is young, alive with eyes wide open, and his suffering is not portrayed, a practice that continues into the 13th century and that emphasizes the divinity of Christ over his humanity. The first depiction of the crucifixion in the decoration of a church is carved into a wooden door panel of the Church of Santa Sabina, Rome, made *c.* 430. Here too, Christ is impassively portrayed, on a cross that is barely visible.[64] The depiction of Christ Crucified in the ornamentation of a place of worship seems to be an exception for it does not reappear until the 8th century, in the frescoes of St. Clement and of Santa Maria Antigua in Rome.

It is most important to note that in the descriptions of the Veneration of the Cross, it is the *relic* of the True Cross that is the object of veneration, not a crucifix. And Egeria does not say that the relic is even in the shape of a cross. Since depictions of the cross are just beginning to be popular and there is no evidence that it is used in liturgical celebrations yet, it is not all surprising that images of the crucifix are mostly absent. The emphasis is still very much on the Resurrection and the glorification of Christ, and on his triumph over sin and death. The wood of the cross is a sign of victory. A cross with the crucified, dead Christ upon it would make no sense in the theology and piety of the Early Christians. As a matter of fact, literary evidence of the crucifix replacing the cross as object of adoration appears only in 1364.[65]

IV. CONCLUSION

A. Cross to Crucifix

Historic, artistic, and epigraphic evidence clearly do point to the use and veneration of the cross itself as the oldest, most authentic, and venerable tradition of the Church. The crucifix, Christ on the cross, is a most important icon of our faith as Roman Catholics today, but it is the

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[63] See illustration in *The Image of Christ,"* 108-111.
[64] See illustration in "Le Christ dans l'art: des origines au XV e siècle," *Le monde de la Bible* 114, 22.
[65] Patrick Regan, "Veneration of the Cross," *Worship* 52 (January 1978), 8.

cross that is the *point de décollage*[66] of the Resurrection: from empty cross of execution, to bed of the Crucified One, to empty cross of the Resurrected Christ! It is evident that the early history of the cross reflects the history of the early Church: the social, political and economic contexts, the theological doctrines, the Christological debates, and the historical events that shaped it. Most importantly, the deeply personal faith of early Christians in the Resurrection is manifested by the places where the symbol of the cross is etched, painted, and shaped.

As illustrated in the essay, there are many reasons for the absence of representations of Christ Crucified in the Early Church: the theological emphasis on the triumph of Christ, the fresh ignominy of death by crucifixion, the incongruity of representing both realities—the Divine One as the Crucified One—and the aniconic tendency of Judaism and of some early Fathers of the Church. The subsequent history and development of the crucifix represent major shifts in theology, religious sensibility, spirituality, and mystical language, and would be the subject of another whole essay.

B. Pastoral Application

The pastoral application of this research on the cross was alluded to in the Introduction, in reference to the revised *General Instruction to the Roman Missal* (2000). Between 1364 and 1969, the crucifix replaced the cross in the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy in the Roman Catholic Church. In 1969, post–conciliar liturgical reform required only the presence of a cross on or near the altar.[67] With the promulgation of the revised *General Instruction*, however, the presence of the corpus on the cross is once again mandated.[68] Does this new emphasis on the crucifix not strike us as a notable step back to post-medieval theology and piety, perhaps even misplaced historicism? The same may be asked of the practice of venerating a crucifix rather than the cross on Good Friday, as had been the original custom since the fourth century at least.

At the center of our faith stands the cross, *locus theologicus*, intersection of God with humanity, the unconditional sign of our redemption and of the Lord's presence, in the Early

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[66] May be translated as *'place of take-off"* or even *'launching pad."*

[67] "General Instruction to the Roman Missal," *The Roman Missal*, 4th ed. (27 March 1975) (New York: Catholic Book Company, 1985), 270.

[68] *The Roman Missal*, 122.

Church, now, and into the future. G. K. Chesterton described the cross as centrifugal, as breaking out:

> For the circle is perfect and infinite in its nature; but it is fixed for ever in its size; it can never be larger or smaller. But the cross, though it has at its heart a collision and a contradiction, can extend its four arms forever without altering its shape. Because it has a paradox in its centre it can grow without changing. The circle returns upon itself and is bound. The cross opens its arms to the four winds; it is a signpost for free travellers. [69]

[69] G.K. Chesterton, *Chesterton: Orthodoxy* accessed 11/24/01 at http://cbn.org/bibleresources/chesterton/orthodoxy/chesterton-b3-19.asp

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