

39. *Should we pray before the crucifix?*

Madam, rest assured, your letter did not scandalize me at all. You are not wrong to ask yourself whether it is wise to have your young children pray before the image of the crucified Christ, whether there is a danger that the image of the Crucified may perturb their emotions.

You are right, however, in holding suspect the motives that lead many Christians of our own day to become alienated from the crucifix, to neglect the Lord's Passion in favor of his Resurrection. As if the Resurrection did not require passage through death! They are far removed from the mind of St. Paul, who declared to the Corinthians, "*I determined that while I was with you I would speak of nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified*" (1 Cor 2:2).

The Christian conscience has been asking the same question as you, with varying degrees of acuity, throughout the twenty centuries of our era. Christian art bears witness to it, and especially the history of the iconography of the crucified Christ: paintings, sculptures, calvaries, crucifixes, etc.

During the first six centuries of the Christian era, Christ was rarely depicted on the Cross. The image of the Good Shepherd was for the Christians of that time what the Crucified is for us today. Subsequently, the Crucifixion became a privileged theme of Christian iconography. There were more and more crucifixes. We see them in the statuary of the cathedrals. They were enshrined in all Christian homes, and in hospitals and schools. They rose up at crossroads and in public squares. Alas! Their production often became a commercial venture, and the Christian people were submerged by these crucifixes devoid of artistic and spiritual quality. Even the representations of the Crucified by genuine artists were sometimes ambivalent, at times more sensual than spiritual. I am thinking now of certain Renaissance painters.

Even truly Christian artists have had divergent conceptions. These can be reduced to two, allowing for some simplification: the "realistic" and the "mystical." Depending on the time and place, they have been received with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

The realistic formula is not the first in point of time. It was slow in gaining acceptance. It seeks above all to express the physical and moral sufferings of Christ. The artists portray him unclothed. His body is lacerated, tortured, distorted with pain to the point of being an unspeakably pitiful remnant of humanity. On his head rests a tragic crown of thorns. These artists seek first of all to arouse the emotions, to awaken compassion, and perhaps to inspire horror for sin. They also intend to encourage Christians to unite their own sufferings to those of Christ. Some of these crucifixes seem empty of all religious content. One has the impression of looking at the symbol of mankind's distress, rather than at the sign of man's salvation through the incarnate Son of God.

The creators of these crucifixes speak of human and historical truth. In fact, "realistic" crucifixes tend to adulterate the truth, or at least to neglect one of its essential aspects. They represent the man who suffers but not for the God who triumphs, the tortures of the flesh but not the victory of love. If Christ had offered only the spectacle of human suffering, if he had been simply a pitiful remnant of humanity, would the centurion standing right in front of him have cried out, "*Clearly this man was the Son of God!*" (Mk 15:39)?

The so-called “mystical” crucifixes express a contrary conception. They portray Christ clothed, sometimes even with a long tunic, and with a crown on his head, usually a crown of thorns, but sometimes an imperial crown. His eyes are wide open, expressing strength of soul and serenity. His face has a halo of glory, and sometimes it is imbued with an infinite pity for men. His arms are horizontal, his body is straight. The artists want to remind us that the Crucified is first of all God, the living God, conquerer of suffering and death, and that his sacrifice is voluntary.

Such artistic works tend less to arouse our emotions than to stimulate our faith in the divinity of Christ, and in his history. They seek to awaken our hope rather than our compassion, to convince us that the Passion was but a passage toward the Resurrection. Some of these crucifixes are cold and emotionless, but there are others from which emanate great tenderness, gentleness, and radiant peace. It is their immense merit not to veil the essential, to allow us to have an intuition of the divine mystery.

Do these few notes on the history of art provide you with a preliminary answer to the questions you are asking me?

To eliminate the crucifix from our churches and our homes would be a frightful religious regression. So be sure to teach your children to pray before the crucifix. For, as the Curé of Ars used to say, it is “the deepest book.” But it is no less true that you must choose among the crucifixes or images of Christ crucified. Ruthlessly reject those that might perturb the emotions of young children, or betray the underlying truth of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In addition, since your children will often be seeing vulgar crucifixes, or crucifixes expressing a non-religious realism, teach them to look at them all with the eyes of a faith that discerns the mystery beyond any imperfect or misleading artistic expression.

Under such conditions, the crucifix will deliver its true message to your children. It will no longer appear as the apotheosis of suffering, but indeed as the sign of the greatest love. This is the love of the Father, who loved men to the point of *giving* them his Son. This is the Son’s love for his Father, and the Savior’s love for men, his brothers. “*There is no greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends*” (Jn 15:13).

It will appear as the apotheosis of joy, too—yes, of the most overpowering joy, for Christ has said, “*There is greater joy in giving than in receiving*” (Ac 20:35).