

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SANCTUARY CRUCIFIX

The use of the crucifix in the sanctuary of a church building is well-rooted in both sacred Tradition and Catholic theology. Therefore, after commenting upon the nature of the rubric regarding this practice, I also want to paint a more wholistic theological picture that answers why the depiction of our crucified Lord in our sanctuaries is fitting and necessary for what we believe as Catholics.

The rubrics of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)* mention four times the use of a cross with a figure of Christ crucified. First, *GIRM* 117 mentions that the altar is to have a crucifix on or close to the altar. Second, this paragraph also states that a crucifix may be carried in the Entrance Procession. Third, *GIRM* 122 says that the processional cross may be placed next to the altar to serve as the altar cross or is otherwise “put away in a dignified place.”

Fourth, *GIRM* 308 unambiguously declares: “There is also to be a cross, with the figure of Christ crucified upon it, either on the altar or near it, where it is **clearly visible** to the assembled congregation. It is appropriate that such a cross, which calls to mind for the faithful the saving Passion of the Lord, remain near the altar even outside of liturgical celebrations.”

There are many loopholes that could be assumed in these rubrics if one does not read them within the appropriate context of liturgical tradition and theology. As with all things, when the Church does not specify with a precise degree of exactitude, we must always interpret through the lens of centuries-old practice, tradition, and teaching.

Therefore, it is clear that the rubrics set forth by the *GIRM* are emphasizing the **importance** of a crucifix, not merely the cursory presence of a crucifix. In other words, having a crucifix in the sanctuary is not an arbitrary requirement to be fulfilled. To claim that this rubric favoring a crucifix is realized by simply keeping a processional cross visible in the sanctuary is to miss the point about the significance of this particular image of Jesus.

The implication of this rubric is that a processional cross would be sufficient as a crucifix in a considerably smaller space, such as a chapel or oratory. It is noteworthy that the rubrics consider the crucifix of enough vital importance for it to be “clearly visible to the assembled congregation.” In other words, such a crucifix would visually dominate the sanctuary while still being in harmony with the other architectural elements of the church. Therefore, to use a different dominant image in the sanctuary while claiming that a much smaller processional crucifix fulfills this rubric is legalistic at best, especially considering the importance and emphasis placed on the crucified Christ.

If we consider these rubrics from a wider perspective, we begin to see that it is not a matter of the sterile application of arbitrary rules, but a theological statement rooted in the beautiful teachings and traditions of the Church. The artful depiction of Jesus Christ on the cross, in various ways, has been common in the Church since the sixth century. This came into development after the collective memory of the cross as a punishment, common in every early Christian, gradually faded from the minds of the faithful. The Roman Empire had long waned by the sixth century, and along with it faded the every-day familiarity with crucifixion as a form of capital punishment. Whereas the cross itself served as a vivid reminder of torture to the early Christians, the crucifix reminded later generations of Christians (who were far removed from the experience of this practice) of the tremendous suffering that our Lord endured for our sake.

This depiction of our crucified Lord eventually made its way into the sanctuary of church buildings beginning in the eleventh century. By the thirteenth century, crucifixes were commonplace both as devotional art and as altar crosses. Eventually, the crucifix came to be regarded as “the principal ornament of the altar.” Its placement in the sanctuary either on or above the altar was for the purpose to “recall to the mind of the celebrant, and the people, that the Victim offered on the altar is the same as was offered on the Cross” (Constitution, *Accepimus* of Pope Benedict XIV, 16 July, 1746).

The Sacred Congregation of Rites in its September 1822 decree states “that it [the crucifix] be large enough to be conveniently seen by both the celebrant and the people.” The modern rubrics of the *Roman Missal* have always treated the crucifix with this utmost importance. The dramatic departure from the tradition of adorning the sanctuary with a crucifix in favor of an image of the resurrected Christ is only a recent and aberrant innovation.

These images of Christ, while beautiful and worthy, are not particularly appropriate depictions that call to mind the sacrifice of Christ in the Mass. This is akin to espousing the virtues of Holy Orders in a Nuptial Mass homily. Though the language may be beautiful, the images used are ultimately for the wrong occasion. So it also is with a central and prominent image of the resurrected Christ in the sanctuary – though beautiful, the image is ultimately for the wrong occasion. Though the Resurrection is undeniably a central tenet of our belief, it is an unfitting image to represent the reality of the Eucharistic sacrifice.

The current rubrics are consistent not only with the longstanding practice and tradition of the Church, but also with the perennial teaching of her Magisterium. The placement of a prominent crucifix in the sanctuary reflects the reality of what is happening during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The Church has always given preference to the crucifix because of the fact that Christ’s death is redemptive. Our Savior’s perfect sacrifice on the cross as both Priest and Victim is the supreme act of his Priesthood.

This same perfect sacrifice is re-presented to us sacramentally through the Holy Mass. Indeed, as Blessed Columba Marmion observes: “At the consecration, under the veil of the sacrament, the cry of the blood of Jesus sounds forth anew, for at that moment all the love, all the obedience, all the sufferings of His oblation on the Cross are presented to the Father. The liturgy proclaims that ‘every time the commemoration of this sacrifice is celebrated the work of our redemption is accomplished anew’” (*Christ: The Ideal of the Priest* by Bl. Marmion).

The image of Christ on his cross reinforces these theological truths and appropriately focuses our mind and spirit on the sacrificial reality that is happening on the altar. A cross without Christ and Christ without the cross both neglect this reality of priestly sacrifice that is absolutely central in our Catholic identity and in the very exercise of religion itself. In the Eucharist, the sacrifice of Jesus is shown to us, its merits are applied to those who participate in the Mass, and the crucifix stands dominantly in the sanctuary as a visible sign and visual reminder of the great miracle that is taking place on the altar.

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