

The Sign of the Cross

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In the essential moment of every sacrament, we will always find the sign of the cross, the symbol of salvation. Given the importance of this sign in the church's liturgy, it is necessary to know its significance. Today, we tend to think of the cross primarily as an instrument of Christ's passion and suffering. It is usually the image of Christ dying or dead on the cross that we see. This concept of the cross comes later in history and is due to the influence of an ascetic spirituality that tended to emphasize the negative elements of renunciation and suffering, obscuring the fundamental fact that renunciation and suffering are necessary instruments of the resurrection.

Quite different is the concept of the cross that is found in paleo-Christian texts. There the cross is the sign of the universality of Christ's power. The four points, or extremities, of the cross are thought of in this sense: the saving power of Christ reaches up to the heights (into the world of angels) and penetrates into the depths (to the world of the dead); it extends outward east and west, north and south.

The power of the cross is so universal that Justin (second century) sees it reflected in many objects of daily life:

Reflect and see if anything on earth can exist without this sign: It is the basis of everything. Can we cleave the sea if this trophy called a mast was not raised on a ship? Can one plough without the cross? Can the laborer work without tools that appear in that shape? We humans only differ in appearance from animals because we stand erect and can stretch out our arms (thus taking on the shape of the cross), and even the prominent nose, organ of life-

giving breath, traces a cross in the middle of the face. You will see still more signs that express the power of the cross. I mean the banners and trophies that point out that the cross is the sign of your power and strength.

The mystery of the cross is thus hidden in every sphere of nature: Justin does not point out the anchor, which is a frequent symbol of the cross, nor the bird, whose outspread wings draw a cross on the sky. So we can say that we find the sign of the cross on the surface and in the depths of the sea, on land and in the heights of the sky. Judeo-Christians were alluding to the universality of the power of the cross when they surrounded the cross with a circle or square that represented the universe.

The cross is often identified with the risen Christ and is considered living. It is said that Christ rose from the cross and ascends into heaven; the cross is Christ in the mystery of his person and the symbol of his salvific strength. The cross is also a prophetic sign of the parousia. The “sign of the Son of Man” is interpreted by the Fathers as the sign of the cross, and therefore it is a luminous cross that precedes the glorified Christ.

In order to understand the meaning and scope of the sacraments that nourish our Christian life, we need to rediscover the universal and eschatological dimension of the cross, which is present at the essential moment of each sacrament. Then we will see in the cross the sign of the actualization, now in time, of the presence of the glorified Christ in the world and in the lives of his believers, and in the cross we will see a concrete sign of the anticipation of the Messiah who will return.