

## **The Cross, a Sign of Reconciliation**

By Fr. Gotthard Rosner, M.Afr.

During Baptism all Christians are marked with the sign of the cross, a symbol that from that moment on they belong to Jesus Christ. During an ordinary day they make the sign of the cross many times. With the thumb they draw it on their forehead to remember that Christ must permeate their mind and intelligence. They draw it on their mouth so that their speech might be influenced by the words of Jesus Christ. They draw it on their heart so that they might be filled with Jesus' love and compassion.

Sometimes they sign themselves with the cross by tracing it from the forehead to the stomach and from the left shoulder to the right one. In that way they express that the crucified Jesus touches their entire life and transforms it. The forehead stands for the mind and reason, the stomach for vitality (our emotions) and sexuality, the two shoulders represent the extremes of human life: light and darkness, joy and suffering, love and hatred, feminine and masculine, virtue and passion, spirit and matter, thinking and feeling and other contrasts or opposites.

### **The sign of the cross in different pre-Christian cultures.**

The symbol of the cross is known long before Christianity.

In Egypt the cross with two "handles" was known as a sign of life and happiness.

The cross as a wheel was a sign of Re, the god of light (the sun).

In India the "swastika" was a symbol of unity and happiness.

The Incas and Maya knew the "Andrew's cross", a cosmic sign uniting heaven and earth.

In Israel the "Tau" was a sign of protection and became a symbol of the final salvation through God (Ez. 9:4).

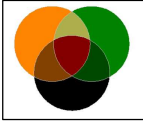
In Africa some of the tattoos on persons' faces show a cross signifying the belonging to a clan or group.

In Greece the "Chi" (Andrew's cross) was a cosmic sign showing the human soul moving towards heaven, uniting all opposites in one human reality (Plato). The cross is a symbol of unity in being and existence.

### **The cross in the teaching of the Church Fathers.**

These different ideas were taken up by the Church Fathers. They see the cross of Christ as a sign of unity between God and human kind, as a sign which unites all opposites and of a sign of reconciliation with God.

Justin, the Martyr, writes that the cross is a symbol of unity of all contradictions and extremes. In the cross Man and God, angel and animal, spirit and matter are united. The vertical beam is rooted in the earth and tends towards heaven, a picture of a human person being expanded between earth and heaven. The horizontal beam



points towards all contrasts of human life mentioned above. The cross of Christ, of course, unites all opposites and creates unity with God.

Irenaeus of Lyon speaks of Jesus' cross as the event which re-unites the universe and humanity with God. He sees the cross pre-figured in the OT, in the ark of Noah which saved humanity, in the staff of Moses which produced water from the rock, in the tree of life from which all people can eat and have life. Because of Adam's sin the tree of life in Eden is not accessible anymore, but it is replaced by the new tree of life, the cross of Jesus.

According to John Chrysostom Jesus' cross is life-giving and unites heaven and earth. It is the summit of God's love and care for humanity.

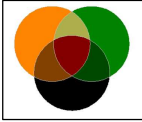
### **The Interpretation of the Cross in the NT.**

#### **The letters of St. Paul.**

- For Paul Christ's death as such had nothing honourable or heroic. The cross for him is a scandal and a disgrace. Only criminals and rebels died on the cross. A Roman citizen could not be crucified. The victim was flogged and then had to carry the cross beam to the place of execution. There he was nailed and/or bound to the vertical beam which was permanently fixed to on the place of execution. Death came very slowly. It could last days before the victim died of suffocation or heart failure. After death his legs were broken to make sure that he was dead.

Paul uses several models to describe and to interpret the meaning of the cross.

- **The model of the sacrifice for sin.**  
Rom. 3:25 : *God appointed him (Jesus) as a sacrifice for reconciliation through faith, by the shedding of his blood, and so showed his justice...*  
The text refers to the Jewish sacrifice for sin and reconciliation on "Yom Kippur". It was characterized through the pouring out of blood. The high priest sprinkled blood on the curtain which separated the Holiest of Holies, sprinkled blood on the altar of incense in the temple and poured blood all around the altar of holocausts outside the temple.  
For the Jews blood was a symbol and the seat of life. By putting blood in contact with God (the altars) the people wanted to receive new life. By pouring out blood they felt that their sins were forgiven and that they were reconciled with God.  
The pouring out of blood also reminded the Jews of the covenant which God had concluded with them (Ex. 24:7-8).  
By pouring out his blood Jesus forgave all our sins and brought us new life, divine life,



- **The model of the Passover feast.**

1 Cor. 5:6-8: *Throw out the old yeast so that you can become the fresh dough, unleavened as you are. For our Passover has been sacrificed, that is Christ.*

Every year the Passover feast was celebrated in Israel in order to commemorate the liberation from slavery in Egypt. Yet it was not only a memorial, it became a present reality. God delivers Israel today and in the future (Ex. 12-13).

In the gospel of John Jesus is proclaimed as the lamb of God by John the Baptist. He dies at the moment when the Passover lambs are slaughtered in the temple, and his bones are not broken after death, because God had commanded that the bones of the Passover lambs should not be broken (Ex. 12:46; Jn. 19:36).

Jesus is the new Passover Lamb that brings us freedom and takes away the slavery to sin.

- **The model of liberating or redeeming a slave.**

1 Cor. 7:23 (and also 6:20): *You have been bought at a price (the blood of Christ). Do not be slaves to any human being.*

In Antiquity slaves could be liberated by paying a ransom. Paul uses this picture to tell us that we are liberated from the slavery of the Law and of sin. Gal. 3:13: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by being cursed for our sake, since Scripture says: Anyone hanged is accursed.*

For Paul the cross is a sign of grace: our salvation will not be accomplished by keeping the Law and doing good deeds, but by Christ who died for us on the cross and showed us God's love by doing so. The cross has become a sign of protest against all those who claim that we can save ourselves by our own efforts and good works. Salvation cannot be bought.

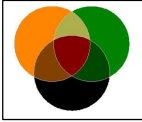
- **The model of God's weakness, a scandal and foolishness.**

1Cor. 1:23-24: *We preach a crucified Christ, to the Jews a scandal (obstacle) ... to the gentiles foolishness, but to those who have been called... a Christ who is both the power and the wisdom of God"*

Here we have a new and original idea of Paul. On the cross we encounter a God who is weak, who dares to be humiliated, who dares to enter human suffering and pain, who becomes fully human and who takes the side of the weak, suffering and poor.

This indeed is a scandal to the Jews who believe in a God of power, the Creator of heaven and earth. It is foolishness for the gentiles who believe in gods that have no feelings and no compassion at all.

The Greeks argued as follows: If we can feel sorrow, joy or grief, someone else has power over us, be it a person or an event. No one can have any power over a god, and this means that gods are incapable of feelings and emotions.



Jesus and Paul show us a different God, a God who is weak, a God who is wrung with anguish for the suffering of his people. The greatest thing that Jesus did was to bring us the news of a God who cares and loves and enters into human suffering (cf. Phil. 2: 5-11).

In Christ's death we have the fulfillment of humanity. Adam and Eve wanted to be like God, wanted to be independent, and refused to accept that they were created, weak and broken. Jesus accepts to be human, to depend on God, to be weak and limited. The sign of his acceptance of his own humanity is his suffering and death, the greatest sign of love.

- **God's Love and Forgiveness.**

Rom. 5:8-11: *For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, how much more can we be sure that now being reconciled we will be saved by his life.*

The cross is an event that reveals God's love and his free initiative. God is not a police man who wants to enforce the law and who wants compensation for the offence of sin. No, the gift of the Son to human kind shows that God forgives and takes away our sins. God's forgiveness is unconditional and does not depend on our good works. It is only in the moment, when we recognize God's love and forgiveness, that we will repent and avoid sin.

- **The cross is a model of our Christian existence and life.**

Gal. 5:24: *All who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified self with all its passions and desires.*

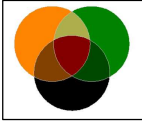
Gal. 6:14: *But as for me, it is out of question that I should boast at all, except of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.*

Phil 2:5: *Imitate Jesus Christ....He who was in the form of God...*

Col. 1: 24: *It makes me happy to be suffering for you now, and in my own body to make up all the sufferings that still have to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the church.*

The cross has become the symbol of our Christian existence in faith. For Paul the cross is a sign of protest against a world which is dominated by passions, power, money, success and ambition. The world with its values of profit, honour and wealth has no power over us anymore, for we live in Christ and Christ in us. The cross shows us a new way of being human: the possibility to live out of love and to give that love to others.

Sufferings, illnesses and hardships belong to the very nature of a Christian, since they complete what is still lacking in the suffering of Christ (Col.1:245) or in other words: our cross continues the salvific action of Christ.. Without it we cannot be Christians.



## The four gospels

One third of the **gospel of Mark** is taken up by the Passion Narrative, the suffering and death of Jesus. Mark tells us that we can only recognize Jesus as the Messiah and Saviour, if we accept his death and resurrection. Jesus is not a Saviour who comes with power and might in order to liberate Israel from the Romans, the colonial power. No, he becomes the Saviour by giving his life for us on the cross and thus reconciling humanity with God.

**Matthew** shows us a similar truth by describing Christ's death as the Day of Yahweh. This day had been announced by the prophets of the Old Testament as a day of judgment and of salvation. It was going to be accompanied by cosmic or apocalyptic signs and natural disasters.

In Mt. 27:45-55 we find the scene of Jesus death. Just before he dies there is darkness all over the land. Jesus cries out that he is abandoned by God, and people mock him. After his death we again find apocalyptic signs (the curtain in the temple is torn, there is an earthquake, the rocks split, the tombs are opened). Then Jesus is acclaimed as Son of God by the Roman Centurion, and instead of people who are against Jesus, we now find the women, disciples of Jesus, who believe in him. The death of Jesus is the moment of judgment over evil and Satan, but it is also the moment of salvation. Through his cross and resurrection Jesus has overcome evil and death, and a new world has been created.

There is another theme in Matthew's gospel: Jesus did not use violence in order to escape death; he did not rely on his divine power to change his destiny. We Christians also must accept and tread the way of non-violence in whatever we do (Mt. 26:52-54). The cross becomes for us a symbol of non-violence (Mt. 5:1-12; 5:38-47).

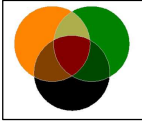
For **Luke** the cross is necessary for Jesus in order to enter into his Father's glory. It is necessary for us in order to enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22).

Luke changes Jesus' saying in Mark 9:34-35. When Mark wrote his gospel, the Christians were persecuted and killed by the Roman State. He, therefore, tells the Christians: Count your cost, be ready to die and carry the cross, if you become a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Luke 9:23 speaks in more general terms: "Take up your cross every day", meaning that the disciples have to accept the hardships, sickness, sufferings and challenges of ordinary life.

In the **gospel of John** the cross, the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit form one reality and unity: the hour of Jesus' death. Several times the evangelist mentions that this hour has not yet come, that it is approaching, and that finally the hour has come (John 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23,27; 13:1; 17:1; 19:27).

On the cross Jesus is already exalted and lifted up into the glory of God. Jesus' death is the moment of judgment, but also the moment in which the kingdom of God is established. If we look at Jesus on the cross, we receive healing and redemption



(John 3: 14-17). If we believe in Him, we receive eternal (= divine) life which even death cannot take away.

All this is shown in the gospel through certain events occurring during the Passion of Christ (John. Ch 18 and 19):

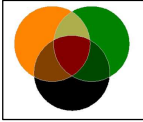
- The soldiers come with lantern and torches (Jn. 18:3). Soldiers in reality do not come with torches or lights, where they can be seen from far away. They come in darkness and complete silence. But John wants to tell us that Jesus is “the light of the world” (Jn. 8:12; 9:5; 12:26) which people search for.
- When Jesus is arrested, he asks the soldiers: “Who are you looking for?” They answer: “Jesus the Nazarene”. Jesus answers: “I am he”, I am the one. In English the text is translated such. The original Greek text, however, says: “I am”, and the soldiers fall to the ground. “I am” is the name of God in the Old Testament, and here Jesus proclaims himself as God. The reaction of the soldiers is typical: they fall down and adore Yahweh.
- The conversation with Pontius Pilate shows that Jesus indeed is a king, but the king of another world, the king of the entire universe. That’s why the title on the cross “King of the Jews” is written in Hebrew, Latin and Greek, the main spoken languages of the time.
- Instead with a loud cry as in the synoptic gospels Jesus dies saying: “It is accomplished”. Yes indeed, his mission is accomplished, God and humanity are re-united and reconciled.
- “And bowing his head he gave up his spirit” (Jn, 19:30). Again the original Greek text is strange. It says: “And bowing his head he gave away the spirit”. The last breath of Jesus is the first moment of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn. 1:33; 20:22).

### **Conclusion**

The cross of Jesus is a symbol of change: hatred is overcome by love, death is overcome by life. Even the most cruel death is penetrated by God’s presence, love and life. The cross shows us how much God loved us and how much Jesus loved us. He loved us up to the end by laying down his life for us (John 13:1).

In their sicknesses and sufferings Christians complete the sufferings of Christ by becoming like their Lord offering their own love, life and humanity to the Father (Col. 1:24).

The cross which we carry around our necks or put on our walls in our houses is a sign of that love. It reminds us that God’s love surrounds us in all difficulties and problems and that it heals all our wounds. It also encourages us to follow Jesus and be full of compassion towards all people, particularly the poor and suffering.



*“God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:15-16).*

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Lusaka, June 2011