

Why the Crucifix?

By Greg Witherow

Sometimes Catholics are asked, “Why do you use a cross with Christ nailed to it¹?” If the questioner is a Protestant (typically an evangelical), there are usually a couple of reasons for the question. One is a belief that the crucifix represents a skewed theology. A second reason is the belief (by some) that a crucifix is idolatrous. It should be pointed out Catholics are not opposed to using a cross. It is a matter of record many Catholic churches have a cross on their steeples. In this essay we will examine why Protestants object to a crucifix and why Catholics use them.

Understanding Our Separated Brethren

Protestants see their empty cross as a witness to the Resurrection. They might tell you, “I serve a risen Savior, therefore my cross is empty”. The implication is an empty cross exclusively witnesses to the gospel, as it speaks to **the finished work** of Christ while a crucifix does not. To some, **a crucifix is offensive** as it is perceived to elevate Good Friday over the Resurrection². And it reinforces Protestant suspicion that Catholics hold to a distorted, morbid and truncated gospel. The following passage, which speaks of our justification (salvation), might be used.

“[he] was put to death for our trespasses and **raised for our justification.**”³

A second group of Protestants view the crucifix as idolatry. Why? It is an image of Christ **that is revered by Catholics.** It is therefore claimed to be an idol. Somewhat related is that the crucifix is a reminder of the Sacrifice of the Mass. Many Protestants falsely believe Catholic priests intend to re-kill Christ as a sacrifice during Mass. No wonder they take offense! *With such an understanding it would be incredulous if they did not.* Let me further illustrate.

As some readers know, the author of this paper is a former evangelical (Calvinist). My wife and I have homeschooled our kids for years. In doing so we used a popular curriculum produced by an evangelical publisher and used by thousands of Christian schools and homeschoolers. After our conversion we continued to use the materials with the provision that we would pre-check the class assignments knowing the publishers were anti-Catholic. I’m glad we did.

We soon came across a children’s story about a little boy who had a Catholic friend. In the story the evangelical boy somehow came in possession of a crucifix. Holding it in his hand he cried out that it was an idol and threw it against the wall, breaking it into pieces. Illustrations depicted the scene. His mother, while admonishing him as overreacting saw his intentions as virtuous and his conclusion as sound. Such anti-Catholic curriculum is not rare in Christian schools.

¹ This describes what Catholics call a crucifix.

² Any implication that Catholics down play the Resurrection is ludicrous. Every Catholic knows Easter is the high point of the liturgical year. Catholics **spend over a month** in Lent **preparing for Easter.** including fasts, special devotions, confession, several holy week Masses, climaxed by an elongated Easter Mass. Attending a Calvinist church there was little that distinguished Easter from other Sunday services. Palm Sunday was given little notice, being a routine Sunday service. And strict Calvinists (per the Regulative Principle) even objected to a Good Friday service as scripture did not instruct it to be celebrated. Evangelicals tend to make a bigger deal of Christmas, with special hymns, staged dramas and Christmas Eve services, than Easter.

³ Romans 4:25 All quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version

We Preach Christ Crucified

The Catholic response is as follows. When the apostle Paul tried to articulate the gospel message into its most simple, core meaning he stated,

“For I decided to know nothing among you **except Jesus Christ and him crucified.**⁴”

He also stated,

“**but we preach Christ crucified,** a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the **foolishness** of God is wiser than men, and the **weakness** of God is stronger than men.⁵”

In the spirit of Paul’s admonition, the Catholic Church sees the crucifix as a visible image of the gospel. *With Paul* the Church proclaims, “**we preach Christ crucified**”. Perhaps not just Jews and Gentiles take offense to this? True, the crucifix is not the only way to “image” the gospel, *but it is certainly a Biblical one.* Such a response may give our first inquirer reason to pause.

Our second inquirer is usually more contentious and difficult to convince. Suffice it to say Catholics do not worship idols (or saints) and we don’t pretend to re-sacrifice Christ in the Mass.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

Paragraph 2114: Idolatry is a perversion of man’s innate religious sense. An idolater is someone who “transfers his indestructible notion of God to anything other than God”. (Catholics worship God alone. Any Catholic will tell you a crucifix is not God. No sane Catholic worships it).

Paragraph 1366: The Eucharist is thus a sacrifice because it *re-presents* (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross, because it is its *memorial* and because it *applies* its fruit... (Catholic priests do not pretend to re-kill, re-crucify or re-sacrifice Christ in the Mass).

Scripture

“And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw **a Lamb standing as though it had been slain.**⁶” (Per the Mass, Christ’s sacrifice is perpetual).

General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)

Paragraph 308: There is also to be a cross with the figure of Christ crucified on it, either on the altar or near it, where it is clearly visible to the assembled congregation... (This requirement is for the Latin Rite Mass).

⁴ 1 Corinthians 2:2

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:23-25

⁶ Revelation 5:6