

The Cross and the Icon

Summary: The shape of the cross informs the architecture of many churches, and the symbol's frequent appearance in the decoration of Christian spaces stands for the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus. For Orthodox Christians, other important images include icons, figurative representations of Christ, the Virgin Mary or saints, which adorn worship spaces, are placed in homes, and are carried throughout everyday life.

The cross is the central symbol of the Christian tradition. For Christians, the cross stands for the central saving drama of the tradition: the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. The cross is the intersection of the vertical and horizontal beams of wood, the “old rugged cross” Jesus dragged through the streets of Jerusalem on the day of his crucifixion. Its vertical and horizontal beams also symbolize for Christians how Christ himself was the intersection of the divine and the human. The simple cross simultaneously directs the heart of Christians toward God and toward one another.

The cross is present in countless ways in the life of the Christian tradition. As Christians worship, they often gather in a space that repeats the cross in its cruciform architecture. As they pause for a moment of prayer, they might symbolically inscribe the cross on their own bodies by making the “sign of the cross.” Catholics will make the sign of the cross as they enter the church, as they approach the altar ready to receive holy communion, or as they sit down to a meal at home. A parent may trace the cross on the forehead of a child being tucked into bed, or a teenager leaving home on a journey. It is both a blessing and a confession of faith. In many Christian denominations, the priest or minister makes the sign of the cross in sanctifying the bread and wine and in sanctifying the waters to be used for baptism. He or she also marks the forehead of a newly baptized Christian with the sign of the cross.

The cross on the altar of a Protestant church is likely to be plain, whether of simple wood or polished brass. Empty, it emphasizes the risen Christ who cannot be contained by death. Through God’s grace, death is already “swallowed up in victory.” In the Roman Catholic tradition, however, Christ is often represented on the cross in an image of the crucified Christ called the crucifix, which makes plain Christ’s sacrifice and the call to sacrificial living that is part of the journey of every Christian. In revealing the suffering of Christ, the crucifix reminds Christians that God’s promise is not to remove suffering miraculously, but rather to accompany people in their suffering.

In Orthodox churches one will find, in addition to the cross, painted or mosaic images called icons. From the time of the seventh ecumenical council in the year 787, these painted images have been recognized along with the cross as holy and worthy of veneration. The icon may be of Christ, the Trinity, the Virgin Mary, or one of the saints. The image is understood to be a “window” opening out toward eternity, drawing the eyes through this visual form toward the Divine. The icon renders for Orthodox Christians the full power of the mystery of the incarnation: “The Word was made flesh, and lived among us, and we saw its glory” (John 1:14). The human image of an icon is holy because God, who is worshipped in the icon, sanctified human life for holiness through the incarnation. The image of God reminds Orthodox Christians that the goal of human life is Godward, moving toward the image and likeness of God, which is the meaning of “theosis.”

In an Orthodox church, the icons are carried in procession. They may be installed on small altars throughout the church. Above all, they are painted or mounted on the iconostasis, a screen of icons that vividly presents the holy images to the congregation and, at the same time, conceals the sacramental mysteries as the priests are preparing the Eucharist. Orthodox families will also have icons in their homes and at their home altars.

Today, with so many visual images saturating the media, the arts, and the world of commerce, the power of the icon to refine human vision, to sanctify it, and to direct it toward the holy is being discovered and appreciated even outside the Orthodox churches. Inspired by the Byzantine tradition, but not directly part of it, are modern-day icons of such “saints” as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, or Mohandas Gandhi. Both traditional and contemporary icons not only direct the eye toward God, but restore the image of the human, who is created “in the image and likeness” of God (Genesis 1:26).