

The Texts of the Convivium

ON TODAY'S CONTROVERSY AGAINST THE DISPLAY OF THE CRUCIFIX IN PUBLIC PLACES

Many people today polemize against the use of displaying the crucifix in public places: hospital rooms, court rooms, offices and schools.

They say: the image of a tortured man depresses those who have already suffered torture.

At one time people used to think the exact opposite, that the person condemned to the most atrocious death would receive comfort from pictures or paintings of the passion of Our Lord displayed by comforting black brothers with their heads masked by a sack with two holes for their eyes.

Another reason adopted is that we can't impose symbols only valid for us to those people of a different religion, or of no religion. As if the meeting with different cultures were necessarily traumatic.

One has to admit that the adoption of the crucifix was certainly aimed at producing some effect in the soul of those invited to contemplate it.

However there is one difference that should be pointed out: in the Church of the Early Middle Ages the cross was presented as an instrument of death and, together, as the tree of life. What originated from this was the following teaching: by dying to ourselves in Christ we can achieve true life, eternal life.

In the late Middle Ages the attention was moved over to the sufferings of Christ, on everything that Jesus suffered in order to obtain our salvation. And the wounds, the thrashings, the sores, the nails, the ghastly torture of the flesh are represented in a more realistic manner, it's almost as if Jesus is telling us: "Look at what they have done to me, what I have had to suffer for you, what your redemption has cost me; shake off your indifference; correspond to my love, love me and follow me".

The new pedagogy was practised in a much more traumatic way, in a climate in which the mystical speculation of the Fathers of the Church had certainly taken a few steps backwards.

In order to state the entire question in the most correct manner, I think it's necessary, first of all, to refer to the substance of Christian teaching. What does Christianity say to each one of us? It essentially makes an announcement: God loves us in such a way that He donates Himself to each one of us in infinite measures.

In this way He makes Himself man so that each one of us can make himself God.

Each one of us creatures made in the image and likeness of God is destined to eternal life, in other words to perfect life, to the attainment of all perfections: saintliness, omniscience, esthetical creativity of the highest level, almightiness as the capacity to efficiently cooperate to the creation of the universe.

In order to attain eternal, perfect, divine life, one has to give up the imperfect, profane life.

In order to make myself God I have to die to myself.

Such is the meaning of the Cross as initiation death.

Let's remain here in the logic of crucifixion understood in the patristic sense: of totally dying to oneself in order to belong to God and to receive everything from Him, beyond all human possibilities and expectations.

One can die to oneself in a thousand different ways, including the sacrifice of life, but also dedication to the service of God, with constant commitment, an entire laborious, tranquil and pacific existence.

God doesn't want the death of anyone. Christ asked His father, insistently, that the bitter chalice of his passion should be taken away from him, but he added that, in any case, may the divine will be done.

So just what is the divine will, in order to be precise? In my opinion there is no doubt that God prefers that His people should welcome the Messiah and that they should follow him just as they followed Moses. At this point Jesus could have abandoned the whole situation renouncing to proclaim himself the Messiah, or insist in proclaiming himself as such until he challenged death, the most horrible of all deaths, giving the most heroic testimony.

God the Father is not some sort of idol who thirsts after victims offered in reparation for offences and to pay honour to Him at all costs. He is the loving Father and He wants His son to be appreciated as he deserves and followed for the good of the People. If Jesus was placed on the cross, then it most certainly wasn't because of his Father's will, but for the will of deviated men, of those to be forgiven since "they do not know what they are doing".

These considerations lead me to interpreting the Cross in the more traditional sense the one which is more closely linked to Christianity of the early centuries: the Cross as the tree of true life. And to have a predilection for a Crucifix similar to that which spoke to Saint Francis of Assisi: "Va', ripara la mia casa!" ("Go, protect my house!")

The crucifixes painted or sculptured and modelled in the following centuries appear increasingly more inspired to a truculence that leads us astray. Despite all this, the crucifix is nevertheless attributable to a symbol of Divinity that works in the long, hard toil of the evolutionary travail, of sacrifice and pain: a weak Divinity that needs to find his collaborators and Samaritans in men.