

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross ©

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There is a Catholic devotion on the Fridays of lent called **the stations of the cross or the way of the cross**. The devotion invites us on a spiritual pilgrimage with Jesus, as he makes his way to the cross, to calvary. At each station there is a phrase that gets repeated over and over which we just heard in the gospel acclamation... “We adore You, O Christ, and we bless You, because by Your holy Cross You have redeemed the world” it seems like there is a lot of focus or emphasis on the cross, why is that, isn't the cross just a symbol or an instrument?

A symbol is a visible sign, image, word or action that points to something beyond itself, for example don't tell me, but if I ask you what is the first thing that comes to mind when I say heart... what would it be... maybe love, friendship, affection... the symbol points to something greater.

An instrument on the other hand is a tool or a mean to accomplish something. If I mention a hammer, you will likely think of a tool used to impact with force. Where a symbol points to something, an instrument produces an effect.

The Romans considered the cross as both a symbol and an instrument. During the Roman Empire the cross symbolized shame, disgrace and dishonor, someone that was crucified was humiliated, beaten, and made a public spectacle. Crosses were placed by roadsides and city entrances so that everyone could see what happened to anyone who went against Roman Authority. The cross was also considered an instrument of torture or execution it was the harshest form of capital punishment; it was a deterrence. Crucifixion was so bad that it was reserved for slaves and rebels, Roman citizens were exempt from crucifixion because of how bad it was considered. To see a cross was to be reminded of **terror, pain, suffering and humiliation**. Carrying a pendant of a cross for the Romans would be like me carrying a pendent of an electric chair today... Yet today we see crosses everywhere, homes, cars, buildings, posters, pictures, jewelry, you name it... **so, what changed the perception of the Cross?**

In the book of Numbers we encounter the story of the people of Israel in the desert, complaining, being bit by serpents, and dying. The Lord asked Moses to place a bronze serpent on a pole and anyone who looked at it **would live**. We can see this as a prefigurement of what was to come. A pole which was likely in the shape of a

“T” or Cross and anyone who looked at it would live. This pole or Cross became an instrument of salvation or an instrument of life for the people of Israel.

In the gospel, Jesus himself references this episode to Nicodemus, he tells him that just like the serpent in the desert was an instrument of salvation, the Son of Man was going to be an instrument of salvation. **So, Jesus being raised on the cross was the instrument of salvation.**

At times I have wondered why a cross, why such a tough way to die. In theory Jesus could have come in any time period, he could have died any other way but for some reason St. Paul tells us that he being God, emptied himself, taking a form of a slave (slaves, rebels and non-Roman citizens died on a cross), became human and died on a cross...

Before you accuse me of being a heretic, I am not saying that I am God or that I was involved in the conversation... But I imagine if God had talked to me and said, hey Julio, we have this plan for you, it involves death on a cross, you will resurrect and by that action you will save the world... I would likely say... great plan... but how about if instead of me dying on a cross... that seems very redundant, many have done it, and it seems kind of graphic, too violent, **how about if I die peacefully while I sleep** and to make it more sacrificial instead of dying for three days, I die for seven... think about it no one has ever come back after seven days... it goes with the seven days of creation, there will be no questions about being God... **think about it... that is pure sacrifice...**

And that is why, I was not involved in the conversation... We do not know why a cross or why that time period, but someday we will... In the meantime, what we do know is that **he died on a cross**, Jesus being God humbled himself to be one of us and die the worst death possible at that time, **because of love...** He did it, so that when he got raised on that cross, we got to believe and have eternal life.

So, what changed our Roman view of the cross? Jesus changed that view...

The Romans saw the cross as symbol of shame, disgrace and dishonor, Jesus transformed it into a symbol of hope, faith and love. The Romans saw the cross as an instrument of terror, torture, execution, an instrument of death, Jesus transformed it into an instrument of healing, peace and life. So is the cross a symbol or an instrument... **yes.**

It is the symbol **and** instrument by which Christ conquered the world, opened the gates of heaven for the saved and offered the ultimate sacrifice... **himself...** which

we get to partake... in the Eucharist... Because of this symbol and instrument, we get to say... We adore You, O Christ, and we bless You, **because by Your holy Cross You have redeemed the world.**