

THE MYSTERY OF THE CROSS

*Bringing Ancient
Christian Images to Life*



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Introduction

*Christianity is a religion founded on
the mystery of the cross of Christ.*

POPE LEO THE GREAT

THE ANCIENT BYZANTINE ARTISTS OF Eastern Christianity contributed a spectacular art form to church history by creating mosaics of biblical characters and stories, along with Christian signs and saints. Mosaicists pieced together tesserae (small pieces of stone, marble or glass) to create enormous images on church walls, ceilings and floors. Visiting a Byzantine church merits constant neck craning, looking up and down, at these intricate creations.

In the sixth century Archbishop Maximianus consecrated Ravenna, Italy's new basilica, Sant'Apollinare in Classe. He named the building after Saint Apollinare, an early martyr and the first Bishop of Ravenna, allegedly appointed by the apostle Peter himself. Walking up the nave, visitors gaze increasingly upward as they approach the apse image of Apollinare with outstretched arms, flanked by the sheep of Christ's flock. The mosaic is a fitting tribute to a holy man who endured repeated beatings for his faith and persistent ministry to Christians.

However, a dominant image looms above the revered bishop, indicating its preeminence. It's a large, gemmed cross with a small bust portrait of Christ positioned at the axis. Perhaps the mosaic's designer

wanted to remind worshipers that even our most devout service can't compare to Christ's sacrificial victory. He wanted us to remember the meaning of the cross.

Early Christians and the Cross

When I began studying early Christian art at mid-life, I discovered how much ancient believers revered Christ's cross. They felt compelled to touch, honor and memorialize it. Christians passed along stories about its power, history and mystery. They replicated the cross in humble homes and grand basilicas, on catacomb walls and stone sarcophagi. Still, they knew the Savior, not the actual cross itself, had ushered in salvation and radically changed their lives. The sign of the cross prompted them to remember, follow and glorify the Lord. This simple sign increased their devotion to Christ.

As obvious as this cross appreciation seems, as a Protestant I hadn't encountered many of the long-established art, signs, legends, rituals, festivals and extra-biblical stories related to Christ's cross. Not because I didn't care; for the most part, I didn't know they existed. My church tradition hadn't taught them. As I sat in the classroom and studied at home, I thought: *This is fascinating. Has this information been here all along? Why haven't I heard about this?* I had lots of catching up to do. I wanted to understand the breadth of early Christianity and its relationship to the cross, the faith's core and widely known symbol.

As I researched and studied further, art and history about the cross both inspired and surprised me. The horror and audacity, simplicity and splendor, reverence and sincerity, captured my imagination. Early Christians so honored the cross, Byzantine religious leaders banned its image in floor mosaics so it wouldn't be stepped on. Somewhere in church history we'd misplaced this sacredness, and perhaps the earliest Christians guarded what we've now lost. On the other hand, certain stories and practices stretched me too far. I couldn't believe the supersti-

tions or every extra-biblical story. Nor could I condone later abuses that pedaled the cross for money and miracles. Then and now, kitschy crosses outnumbered the liturgical ones. Still, somewhere in between, early Christians taught me remarkable, life-changing lessons about the cross.

When I shared these sign-of-the-cross anecdotes with my friends and family, they usually responded by saying, “I didn’t know that.” Or, “It’s interesting. Tell me more.” As a result, I wrote *The Mystery of the Cross*. It begins by addressing pre-Christian crosses and then the cross-related art, life and worship of early believers during the first millennium after Christ’s birth. The chapters are both informational and devotional, prompting you to consider not just the early Christians, but the cross’s influence on you, too.

Ancient Cross, Contemporary Life

If you haven’t considered the cross beyond weekend worship, tapping into these images and stories can broaden and deepen, renew or strengthen your commitment to Christ. Exploring the art, uses and history of the cross can validate its centrality to the Christian faith. Meditating on its enduring meaning can help apply its power and principles to everyday matters.

Accordingly, *The Mystery of the Cross* invites you to read intriguing stories about the sign of the cross, ponder their meaning and consider how these anecdotes speak to you. The forty short chapters can be read for art appreciation, historical information, personal meditation, spiritual formation, small-group discussion, Lenten observation or worship insights. Whatever the use, *The Mystery of the Cross* can help you understand and appreciate the cross’s spiritual work in the world and its power for everyday life.

Most of all, I hope this book witnesses mystery. The apostle Paul wrote about the gospel’s mystery, revealed through Christ and his death on the cross. Irenaeus, a second-century church father, described it when he explained, “By means of a tree, we were made

debtors to God. Likewise, by means of a tree [the cross], we can obtain the remission of our debt.” Beyond glorious art, ancient history and intriguing anecdotes, the cross stands as a symbol of salvation. For reasons beyond my comprehension, the mighty God stooped to conquer evil and forgive sin. This is his eternal commitment. This is the inexpressible value and mystery of the cross.