



The Crucifixion Icon

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The cross is seen in frescoes of the catacombs dating to the first century AD. The earliest clear visual representation of the cross was used in a vile piece of anti-Christian graffiti on Palatine Hill in Rome. It crudely portrays a donkey hanging on a cross, over the caption "Alexamentos worships his god." In the first centuries the cross was a stumbling block to unbelievers. Christians were thought to be cannibals who worshipped an executed criminal. Mike Aquilina, in his book *Revealing Ancient Christian Symbols*, describes the reality of crucifixion:

For there was no more grotesque way to be executed. The ancient Romans had a special genius for torture, and crucifixion was the utmost refinement of their art. The Jewish historian Josephus called it "the most wretched of deaths." It was designed to cause the most pain in the most parts of the body over the longest period of time. The cross was humiliating, too, so it was usually reserved for slaves, non-citizens, lower-class criminals, or those whose crimes were especially heinous. The stripped man was exposed naked to a boorish crowd that delighted in such spectacles. They cast stones at him, spat at him, jeered at him.

The victim found himself suspended above the ground, his body slumped forward, his knees bent and his feet positioned as if he were standing on tiptoe. That position made it almost impossible for him to draw a breath. He could not inhale or exhale without using the nails in his wrists to pull his body upward, simultaneously pushing up from the nails in his feet. With every breath, he felt the coarse metal tearing at his nerves.

Gradually, his limbs cramped and weakened. As he was less able to lift himself, he began, slowly, to suffocate.

Thus a victim of crucifixion alternated between the panicked sense of asphyxiation and searing pain of the nails in his flesh. Relief from one inevitably brought about the agony of the other. In a strong man, this could go on for many hours, even days.

Executions took place in public venues. So crucifixion would have been a familiar sight to many of the early Christians. This too may account for the dearth of crosses in the archeological record. Those who had seen a man crucified would hardly need to gaze at a reminder when they attended Sunday Mass. They already knew the price of their redemption.

Only when we know the horror of the cross can we recognize the shock value of St. Paul's claim to "glory...in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal 6:14).

Christ shown in the St. Regis Icon is presented as he struggles for a last breath. Nearly exhausted, he only has enough strength in one foot to allow a breath. He forces his body upward and suffers the agony of the nail pounded through his ankle so that he may speak to us.

"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do."(Lk 23:33-38)

It was the intent of the artist to present Christ as the sacrifice of the Mass. His eyes gaze at us, forgiving us, loving us, beckoning us to join him with his heavenly Father.

"Father into your hands I commend my spirit." (Lk 23:44-46)