

## **BIRKIRKARA and the CROSS**

The Collegiate Church erected by Pope Urbanus VIII in 1630 in honour of St. Helen has a great connection with the Cross. The first impression that comes to mind is because St. Helen the Patron Saint, was the person who promoted the cult of the Cross. St. Helen was the person, who, according to reliable historical sources, made her efforts to find the true Cross on which Jesus was executed, by the worst punishment his enemies chose to inflict upon him. The cross and the crown are in fact adopted by the Birkirkara Civil Council in its coat of arms

### **The cross in history**

The cross conveys the idea of bloodshed, the agony and horrors of brutal punishment, the torment of slaves paying the debt for committing terrible crimes against their masters. It reminds us of the imaginable torments of prisoners, hanging on this terrible instrument resulting in their death after a long agony. Although no Roman citizen however guilty found, was permitted to die crucified, yet the Romans tolerated that criminals from those countries they occupied, would be executed by being crucified. It was a really terrible torment. In fact George Bernard Shaw, meditating on the ugliness of the cross, exclaimed : “ I object to the cross as I object to all gibbets”.

### **The cross and art**

Fr Daniel Lord S.J. in his pamphlet “The Invincible Standard” points out that the ugliest symbol in the world is the cross, defying all the laws of beauty, lacking all the play and light and shadow”

What a great contrast is the cross, consisting of two rough cut wood, with the symbol of David’s star almost snatched from heaven to be the light for the Jews returning from exile to their homeland. It was for them a symbol of hope and courage. Not even Mohammed’s soft crescent moon as a sign for his followers, can be compared to the cross, which leaves to be desired from the artistic point of view. Even the swastika, breaks the cross’s lines horizontally, suggesting movement mitigating its atrocious idea of suffering. “Cursed is he who hangs upon a tree” (Deut. 21,23) was the Jews attitude towards the cross. It was no compliment to the so called King of the Jews, so much hated by his enemies to choose for him this kind of death, reserved for the worst criminals (Wisdom 2, 20)

### **The folly of the cross**

The Apostles were shocked to hear their master referring to his death on this bloody instrument reserved for renowned criminals. They were more puzzled when their master showed a sort of yearning for the cross. This is evident from Peter’s reaction to Christ’s determination to go to Jerusalem and there suffer death which would also lead to his glorification

Even after Christ’s victory over death, by his resurrection, the cross retained among many people its horrifying effect. In fact in the year 64, during Nero’s persecution, the hatred for Christian belief was shown by putting the Prince of the Apostles, Peter , to death on the cross. Even his brother Andrew, the first one to be called to follow Jesus, was put to death on the cross. Andrew a calm person that he was, embraced the cross of his execution and kissed the rough wood on which he was to be hung for days before his death. It might be that the Apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit, remembered Christ’s words “When I am lifted up in the ground, I shall draw all men to myself” (John 12, 32). Peter considered it a privilege to die not with the sword that had to behead Paul, a Roman citizen, but on an ignominious cross like that on which his Master gave up his spirit. No wonder therefore that the first Christians modified the figure of the cross to one of an anchor or the Greek letter Tau (T)

Yet Paul insists on the role of Christ, mediator between heaven and earth who redeemed mankind by dying on the cross. In his letter to the Philippians 2, 7-8 we find: “Jesus Christ did not cling to his equality with God, emptied himself to assume the condition of slave and become as man and being as all men are, he was humble even to accept death, death on the cross”

### **The Cross in Art**

Despite the fact that the cross is devoid of all the signs of beauty, yet Christian Art makes this sign the crucial point of its achievement. Architects inspired by the cross change the Roman law courts into Basilicas. Even the form of the great Romanesque and Byzantine Basilicas, retain the form

of the cross. The apse represents the place where Christ laid his head; the nave represents the large section that held his body, while the transepts represent the arms of Christ that held his hands nailed to the cross on its horizontal part. The cross is chosen as a decoration on the middle part of the frontispiece as well as on the highest part of the dome. On the pinnacle on the great obelisks reigns the sign of the cross.. On the inner walls of consecrated temples, we see twelve signs of the cross, which were anointed with Holy Oils during the ceremony of the dedication of the temple

### **The Cross in the Liturgy**

The Bible gives no evidence of the making the sign of the cross so common amongst us. It is said that this custom was introduced later, when passages from the Scripture were read , after signs of the cross were made with the thumb on the forehead, on the lips and on the heart.. The first instance of painting the crucified body of Christ on the Cross was introduced in the fifth century in the church of St. Sabina. But in the second century, Holy Communion was distributed by the celebrant touching with the host the forehead and the eyes of the person receiving Holy Eucharist in the form of a cross. Tertullian (211 A.D.) encourages the faithful to make the sign of the cross before meals, when waking up and before going to bed at night. Hippollitus' gives instructions to make the sign of the cross with faith as a protection against the devil. The sign of the Cross became the sign of the Christian

The Church continued to promote the cult of the Cross. The cross plays an important part in the administration of Sacraments. The water in Baptism is poured on the forehead of the newly born in the form of the cross with the form "I baptize you ...". Confirmation and the Anointing of the Sick are conferred by the imposition of the hands in confirmation and the anointing with Holy Oils. Blessings and other sacraments include the sign of the Cross.

On Good Friday in the evening Liturgical Function, the Cross is adored. The Celebrant for three times sings; Ecce lignum Crucis in quo salus mundi pepedit (= Behold the Cross on which mankind was saved)

Before the Liturgical Reform, there were two feasts in honour of the Cross; the 3<sup>rd</sup> May festivity, recalling the Finding of the Cross and the 14<sup>th</sup> September celebration the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. In Birkirkara and in Valletta a special feast is held to commemorate the Finding of the Cross, hidden in the debris under Mount Calvary, by Christ's enemies to destroy every trace for his followers. In both places a solemn procession is held after high mass. In the case of Birkirkara the sculptured wooden statue of St. Helen is carried on shoulders and the precious relic of the Holy Cross enshrined in an artistic reliquary (ostensorium) is carried by the celebrant under a red canopy accompanied by the Clergy and these recent years by the Members of the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre. Incidentally the altarpiece at the main altar, the artist Francesco Zahra chose the scene of the finding of the Cross on a large canvas painting. St. Helena embraces the Cross of Our Lord in the company of St. Macarius, Bishop of Jerusalem

The 14<sup>th</sup> September celebration recalls, the returning of the Holy Relic of the Cross to Jerusalem, from where it was stolen by Chosroas II in 614 and kept for fourteen years in Persia. Emperor Heraclius recovered this Holy Relic, (left by St. Helen in Jerusalem) and took it in procession bareheaded and barefooted, accompanied by Bishop Zacharias to its former place. This feast is obligatory in the Roman Calendar

It is worthwhile mentioning the hymn by the learned Venantius Fortunatus, Bishop of Potiers : "Vexilla Regis Prodeunt", which is so rich in meaning and expression The occasion was the donation by the Emperor Justin II of a relic of the true Cross to Radegunda, Queen of the Franks (569 A.D.) Some bishops and church prelates held a small relic of the Holy Cross in their pectoral cross

### **The theme of the Cross in Birkirkara Basilica's affrescos**

In Birkirkara, the theme of the Cross plays an important part in the Roman artist's Virginio Monti affrescos. The latter had at his disposal a detailed and elaborate critical life of St. Helen prepared by the learned Canon Salvatore di Pietro, the Palermitan member of the Clergy well versed in Church History and Patrology. To the credit of Monti were his efforts to put in affresco on the inner parts of the vaults of the dome, the nave and the transepts the results of Salvatore di Pietro's studies, choosing the right figures and concepts.

Constantine's mother Helen was married to Costanzo Cloro, a Roman General. He was given a promotion by Emperor Diocleziano as Caesar of Gaul on condition that he should leave his lawful wife and marry Teodora, daughter of Massimiliano Erculeo. This meant a great suffering for St Helen for a period of seventeen years. In the meantime Costanzo died and was succeeded by his son Constantine. The latter had a great enemy Maxentius, to conquer, having no right to govern. In broad daylight, the day before the decisive battle over Ponte Milvio, Constantine saw the sign of the cross in heaven with the words "in hoc signo vinces" (=this sign will bring you victory). He ordered that the sign of the cross be drawn on all the battle's equipment and in actual fact, the victory over Constantine's enemy resulted after the overthrow of Maxentius being drowned in the Rhine.

This victory had a great impact on the life of Constantine, who called his mother Helen to live with him in the imperial palace, granting her all the privileges of an empress. After the Edict of Milan (313 A.D.) Helen did all her efforts to rehabilitate those who suffered injustice, imprisonment, tortures and exile. But in her heart of hearts, Helen was anxious to give the due worship to the sign of victory. Monti shows the eighty year old Helen being inspired to go as a pilgrim to the Holy Land with the goal of finding the true cross of Jesus. With the help of Bishop Macarius she made research work about the place where this cross might be hidden. Her efforts accompanied by prayer, were crowned with success. The temple of the false gods built on the Calvary had to be demolished and after attentive excavations the three crosses and the passion emblems were recovered. There are different versions on how the true cross was identified. St. Paulinus of Nola says that the touch of the Holy Cross with the body of a woman dying of an incurable disease resulting in her instant cure gave a clear indication of the Cross on which Our Lord died.

### **The Relics of the Cross**

St. Macarius was given a relic of the Cross for his Church in Jerusalem, which Constantine ordered to be erected on the Holy Tomb. Another piece was taken with St. Helen back to Rome to be put for veneration at the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme. Other parts of the Cross were kept in churches built on Mt. Olivet, the place of the Ascension and at Betlehem. Several other relics of the Holy Cross are found in different places for the worship of the faithful.

### **The Cross kept for devotion**

There is a custom in the Maltese Islands of giving a bride a crucifix to hang on the walls of their new home. Many keep a small crucifix attached to a golden chain around their neck. The Pope and the Prelates wear the pectoral cross. Church vestments are adorned with the sign of the cross. Hermits left the University rooms to take their abode in caves, where they spent long hours meditating on Jesus Christ. Dun George Preca, (1880-1962) the founder of the Society of Christian Doctrine, a prolific writer of different aspects of the Catholic Doctrine in vernacular, wrote a series of meditations on Christ on the Cross, calling the book "Il-Ktieb il-Kbir" (- the Great Book). St. Bonaventure, the Seraphic Doctor admitted that in the cross he found a wisdom that University libraries could never furnish. Some people don't understand why hermits left their homes and took refuge in caves and abodes in the desert and spent so much time absorbed in prayer meditating the Cross. During the Holy Wars, the Crusaders hang the cross from their neck, to meet their enemies in battle adorned with the crescent moon defending holy places connected with the mortal life of Our Lord Jesus. St. Joan of Arc, carried the cross on her heart to the place and till the last moments of martyrdom. Many a parent bless their child with the sign of the cross on their forehead, mindful of the ceremony of the Effeta in Baptism. The Bishops put the sign of the cross before their signature as if it were their seal. The sign of the cross adorns the tombs of many of our departed buried in the cemeteries.

**"My yoke is sweet and my burden is light" (Mt 12, 9)**

The programme of Christ's followers (Lk 9, 23) does not guarantee freedom from pain (physical or moral), sorrow, disappointments in our daily life. But the cross must be borne with Christ; otherwise it becomes hell. This is why the cross and yoke become synonyms. Thomas a Kempis in his book "Imitation of Christ Book II chap.XII, 4. writes: *"The cross therefore is always ready and everywhere waits for thee. Thou canst not escape it, whithersoever thou runnest; for wheresoever thou goest, thou carriest thyself with thee and shalt ever find thyself. Both above and below, without and*

*within, which way whatever thou dost turn thee, everywhere thou shalt find the cross".* Simon of Cirene was forced to carry Christ's cross, being at first reluctant, but later on Simon experienced, that sharing the cross with Christ was beneficial and was really a yoke sweet and light. This same experience was shared by thousands of Christ's followers throughout the ages. The Via Crucis, the Way of the Cross is being lived day by day, by many followers of Christ in different ways and in different countries.

### **The Birkirkara dome's Last Judgement**

Christ will come again in glory to judge mankind. This second coming is pictorially shown in Monti's affrescos in the dome. As foretold by Simon, Jesus is the sign of contradiction. All those who accepted Him and the Cross will take place on the right hand. Those who opposed his teachings and chose to do their will, believing to find their happiness and fulfillment will be disappointed and punished for eternity. Keeping in mind the Last Things, (the Novissimi) we appreciate the choice of doing God's will. Our daily sacrifices, however small they might be, would be our part in carrying the cross which Our Saviour carried on his shoulders on his way to the Gabbata, the place of his crucifixion and will be the golden key that will open for us the door leading to the kingdom of heaven

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