

“CHRIST ON THE CROSS” LESSONS FROM LUTHER’S PIETY



I can be a bit impatient while making my way through museums. As I read one description, I quickly see another display that catches my eye, and so it goes. But when I saw the life-sized canvas of Christ on the Cross, I was more than a little intrigued by Our Lord’s face, his expression. And yes, the large Latin poem inscribed on either side of Jesus’ feet also piqued my curiosity. The combination of the image and the inscription invites contemplation. In a flash, the other objects displayed at the **Minneapolis Institute of Arts** in last fall’s exhibit marking 500 years since the Reformation had to wait. This piece seemed to be trying to “speak” to me. I learned it was the crucifix painted by **Lucas Cranach the Younger**. I learned it was a crucifixion scene painted by **Lucas Cranach the Younger**. While this particular image was painted after Luther died, versions of Cranach’s image shared the same characteristics dating to 1536. Luther gazed upon such depictions of the crucifixion daily. Needless to say, while I have numerous and significant differences with the classic theology of Luther in a host of areas, I gained valuable insight into his piety by gazing upon this image. The differences from most other crucifixes were readily apparent: blood gently drips from our Lord’s hands and feet, his eyes remain open, and the absence of a wound from his side all indicate that the image depicts a time prior to his death.

Some would immediately object— “But being crucified involves tremendous physical pain, excruciating pain.” Indeed, it did. Yet, there is something deeper at play than historicity here. This crucifix reveals a theology and spirituality of the Cross that represents classic “Lutheran” piety, and as Catholics, I believe it is helpful for us to understand and, where possible, to appreciate. While doing a little more research, I came across a most helpful explanation of this crucifix. Art historians **Dr. Martina Sitt and Desiree Monsees** co-authored an insightful explanation of this crucifix, positing: “this painting illustrates a fundamental principle of the reformist

Passion theology. Martin Luther interpreted the cross of Christ as a **form of comfort giving strength** and assistance and not only terrifyingly recalling the gesture of divine judgment. For him, the crucifixion was the most emphatic visualization that only faith in God can redeem the sinner and it corresponded most closely with his expectations of Christian iconography: it presents the grace of God through Christ to the faithful viewer and keeps their faith alive.”

Then, my gaze turned to the Latin poem below. I had never seen such a lengthy inscription “attached,” if you will, to a painting of a crucifixion scene. The opening lines both intrigued me and drew me in: ‘QVI ME CERNIS HOMO: TE CERNE, TVVMQ REATVM’... “You man who look at me, you see yourself and your own guilt; For I would be without death, if you were not subject to death; That which I suffer your fault has caused and because of it I am fulfilling the law.” The author of the inscription, **Johannes Maior** (1533-1600 A.D.), was a professor of poetry at Wittenberg beginning in 1549 A.D. His poem is effectively a very personal conversation between Jesus and the one gazing upon Him. The **gaze of Jesus appears serene** and even somewhat distant, yet his eyes look lovingly and compassionately at the subject— in other words, at us!

For many years, I have viewed crucifixes of all styles and eras, knowing full well that it is impossible to encapsulate the fullness of the passion in any single image. I own several crucifixes myself, each different from the other. The reality is multifaceted, and while the **dramatic crucifixes** of the Spanish Renaissance have never particularly attracted me, I am cognizant of their value. We cannot shield ourselves from the reality of the tremendous pain and suffering of our Lord. In this painting and by means of its accompanying poem, Jesus is speaking very personally to all who gaze upon his image. When we look into an image of Jesus on the Cross, what (or whom) do we see? Do we see the pain of Jesus or do we see the pain that **we caused** Jesus? Perhaps it is both, but in the mind and heart of Luther, the passion was to evoke deep feeling. For him, the crucifixion was “the most emphatic visualization that only faith in God can redeem the sinner.”

That which Jesus suffers, was caused by “our fault,” and yet the image is not terrifying, but comforting. Look at the **eyes of the Lord Jesus**. They comfort, even as the words of the poem admonish. Which image, which sentiment wins out? Later in the poem: “I formed you: I paid back for you: I have rescued you from the enemy. I am yours, and my merit becomes wholly yours.” It is as if Jesus is reaching out to the sinner, reassuring, in merciful surrender. The poem ends with this reassurance in its final strophe: “Therefore, the end of my life is the source of yours.” Could the wafting garment of Jesus, flowing in the wind, signify that his suffering will give rise to his ascension to heaven following his resurrection?

The Reformation was the **single most painful historic wound** in the unity of the one Church of Jesus Christ. I cannot gloss over the fact that its effects were disastrous in Germany and beyond. Five centuries later, while acknowledging ecumenical progress in some areas, fundamental differences remain in sacramental theology, ecclesiology and, increasingly so in moral theology. And yet, in the spirituality of the Passion, there is legitimate space for shades of interpretations, differing areas of emphasis among Christians. Many of us Baby Boomers remember looking through a toy kaleidoscope as kids. When rotating the toy, **intricate and iridescent mosaic images** and shapes suddenly changed. When we gaze upon a crucifix, is it not possible that what captures us today may be very different than what we saw decade earlier, or even last week? We should approach a crucifix with an open heart and a soul yearning for an encounter with the One who made possible our salvation. The passion must be interiorized, and this particular image truly captivated me.

- Ontario legislators passed a bill that restricts pro-life free expression—including sidewalk counseling and showing “disapproval” of abortion— within 50 meters (164 ft.) of an abortion clinic. Pro-life advocates will tell you that sidewalk counseling is effective, that some women change their mind on the spot and choose instead to receive support in carrying their child to full-term
- I saw a shocking statistic indicating that one-third of young adults (ages 18-24) claim that they do not believe in God. It is cited in a book by **Jean Twenge, PhD**, a professor of psychology at San Diego State, entitled “iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood.” This is truly sobering. We must redouble our efforts to reach out to young adults.

- Many conspiracy theorists were captivated by the release of the assassination related files of President John F. Kennedy by the **National Archives**. It is significant history, and yet must be so painful to re-open in the memories of family members. When I see the grainy black and white images, the clothing styles and the automobiles, etc. I must remind myself that I was alive, albeit just about three months old! It just seems like an entirely different era.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector