

In consideration of a crucifix at St. Paul's, see below:

- 1) LCMS FAQ
 - 2) Pastoral letter from Redeemer Lutheran Nashville, considering a crucifix
 - 3) Pastoral letter from Epiphany Lutheran, Westfield, IN, explaining the purpose of the crucifix
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1. LCMS Frequently Asked Questions

Is the use of crucifixes a Roman Catholic practice?

Doesn't the empty cross provide a better symbol for Lutherans?

How does the LCMS feel about using a crucifix in church?

[Note: A crucifix is a cross with a statue of the crucified Christ on it.]

A: A common misunderstanding among some Lutherans is the opinion that a crucifix, or the use of a crucifix, is a "Roman Catholic" practice. The history of Lutheranism demonstrates that the crucifix was a regular and routine feature of Lutheran worship and devotional life during Luther's lifetime and during the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy. It was also the case among the founding fathers of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. If you were to visit most of the original congregations of the LCMS in the United States you would find lovely crucifixes adorning their altars, and, in addition, beautiful statues on the altar of Christ and the four evangelists or other such scenes. There is nothing uniquely Roman Catholic about this. Many Lutherans and Lutheran congregations use crucifixes. Crucifixes are used in the chapels of both of our seminaries and our International Center.

Lutheranism has always considered the crucifix to be a powerful reminder of the sacrifice our Lord Jesus made for us and our salvation, on the cross. A crucifix vividly brings to mind the Apostle Paul's divinely inspired words, "We preach Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23).

Interestingly enough, while there is certainly nothing "wrong" with an "empty" cross, the practice of using an "empty cross" on a Lutheran congregation's altar comes more from non-Lutheran sources. At the time of the Reformation there was conflict between Lutherans and Reformed Christians over the proper place of pictures, images, statues and the like in the church. Lutherans stood with historic Christendom in realizing that such art in the church was not wrong, and it was a great aid for helping to focus devotional thoughts on the truths of the Word of God. No greater truth can be found than the death of Jesus Christ our Lord for the world's salvation.

The "empty cross" is not a symbol of Christ's resurrection, as some say, for the fact is that the cross would have been empty regardless of whether or not Christ had risen from the grave. The point to be kept clear here is that both an "empty cross" and a crucifix symbolize the same thing: the death of Christ our Lord for the salvation of the world. Many feel the crucifix symbolizes this truth more clearly and strikingly. That has been the traditional opinion of historic Lutheranism, until the last 50 years ago, due to the influence we will now mention.

Some Lutherans began to move away from crucifixes during the age of Lutheran Pietism, which rejected much of Lutheran doctrine and consequently many Lutheran worship practices. At the time, Lutheran Pietists, contrary to the clear position of Luther and the earlier Lutherans, held that symbols such as the crucifix were wrong. This was never the view of historic Lutheranism. In America, Lutherans have always felt a certain pressure to "fit in" with the Reformed Christianity that predominates much of the Protestant church. Thus,

for some Lutherans, this meant doing away with things such as crucifixes and vestments, and other traditional forms of Lutheran worship and piety. It is sad when some Lutherans are made to feel embarrassed about their Lutheranism by members of churches that teach the Word of God in error and who do not share Lutheranism's clear confession and practice of the full truth of the Word of God.

Lutheranism has always recognized that the use of any symbol (even the empty cross) can become an idolatrous practice, if in any way people are led to believe there is "power in the cross" or that a picture or representation of a cross has some sort of ability, in itself, to bring us into relationship with Christ and His Gospel. Any of God's good gifts can be turned against Him in this life and become an end in themselves.

Lutherans have never believed that banning or limiting proper artwork in the church is the way to prevent its improper use. Rather, we believe proper teaching and right use is the best way, and the way that is in keeping with the gift of freedom we have in Christ to use all things to the glory and honor of God. Thus, many Lutherans use and enjoy the crucifix as a meaningful reminder of our Lord's suffering and death. It might interest you to know that our Synod's president has a beautiful crucifix adorning the wall of his office, constantly reminding him and visitors to his office of the great love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In short, and this is the most important point of all, there is nothing contrary to God's Holy Word, or our Lutheran Confessions, about the proper use of the crucifix, just as there is nothing wrong with the proper use of an empty cross, or any other church symbol by which we are reminded of the great things God has done for us. We need to guard against quickly dismissing out of hand practices that we believe are "too Roman Catholic" before we more adequately explore their use and history in our own church.

In Christian freedom, we use either the crucifix or an empty cross and should not judge or condemn one another for using either nor not using either symbol of our Lord's sacrifice for our sins (<http://www.lcms.org/faqs/worship>).

2. Why a Crucifix?

The question of whether a Lutheran church should use a crucifix is an adiaphoron, that is, neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture. A better question is whether a crucifix is good and helpful in Lutheran worship. Perhaps the best answer I can give is found in the inspired words of St. Paul:

*For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach **Christ crucified**, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are being called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:22-24).*

*For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and **him crucified** (1 Cor. 2:2).*

*O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed **as crucified** (Gal. 3:1).*

*But far be it from me to boast except in **the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ**, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Gal. 6:14).*

The last verse referenced above (Gal. 6:14) could certainly give a reason for displaying a plain cross. But, we boast in the cross "of our Lord Jesus Christ," and it is by "his stripes" that "we are healed" (Is. 53:5), not by the wood of the cross.

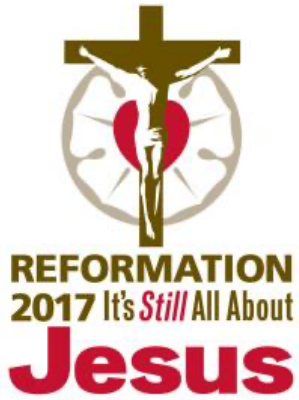
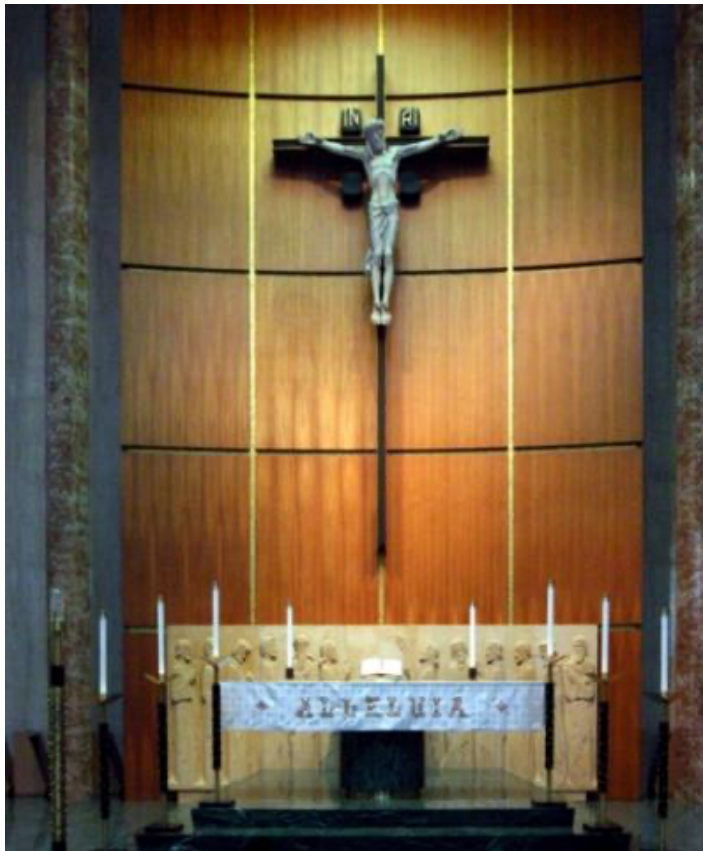
Since Paul preached the crucifixion so vividly to the Galatians that they could see it in their mind's eye (Gal. 3:1), why not put it in front of the physical eye?

The crucifixion of Christ is the Gospel that Paul proclaimed. Jesus himself told us that we are to look upon the crucifixion (with eyes of faith) and not turn away if we are to have healing: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (Jn. 3:14).

A crucifix is scandalous, but so is a plain cross. A cross is an instrument of death. Displaying one in the chancel of a church is like putting up a hangman’s noose, or an electric chair, or a syringe used for a lethal injection. What a crucifix indicates perhaps better than a plain cross is *who* took that awful death and condemnation for us. Regardless of the use of a plain cross or a crucifix “Jews and Greeks” (1 Cor. 1:22-24) are going to be scandalized by our *message* of “Christ crucified.” Why not be bold, then, and proclaim Christ crucified in Word and art?

As you further consider the question of a crucifix, take note of the logo the LCMS is using for the celebration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. See also the photo of the chapel at Concordia University, Mequon, WI.

– *Pastor Young; Redeemer Lutheran, Nashville, TN*



Above: LSMS Reformation logo & Chapel at Concordia University, Mequon, WI. Below: possible crucifix for St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church, Clarence Center, NY



3. Why does a Lutheran Church have a crucifix above the altar?

I thought we focused on the living, resurrected Christ.

Recently, the above question was posted on our Facebook page. It is a good question, and one I assume many of you have asked yourselves over the years. I will admit seeing a crucifix hanging above our altar is a bit strange and startling; in fact, to some visitors, it might even be off-putting. It is the first symbol which catches your eye upon entering the sanctuary. It's also the focal point throughout the entire Divine Service. So why did we, as a congregation, choose a crucifix (i.e., displaying the bodily corpse of Christ) rather than a decorative, ornamental cross? This question could be answered rather plainly by stating the crucifixion of Christ will always be the greatest display of God's love for us sinners! After all, you need look no further than the words of St. Paul, "But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). However, let us explore further the nature of the Church and the very foundation of our faith.

According to our own Lutheran teachings, the one holy Christian Church on earth exists for the proclamation of the Gospel. The Gospel is to be preached throughout the world in its purity and its entirety. And what is this Gospel message? St. Paul provides the answer: "For I determined not to know anything among you except **Jesus Christ and Him crucified**. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:2-5).

Every sermon, every lesson, every instance of instruction should be an elucidation of the Gospel. In fact, every aspect of the Church—her architecture, art & furniture—should speak this powerful message and provide unspoken witness to the central theme of the

Gospel: Christ and Him crucified! To that end, the crucifix over our altar serves to draw our attention to the essence of the Gospel. Each Sunday, our physical senses are greeted with the image of the Gospel hanging directly in front of us. Before we ever *hear* the Gospel proclaimed to us, we *see* the Gospel proclaimed before us!

According to our Lutheran teachings, the one holy Christian Church on earth exists for the administration of the Sacraments (Baptism, Lord's Supper). Our life together is sacramental. We are created, shaped, formed, and held together in the one true faith by means of these powerful mysteries. But why are these Sacraments so powerful? In brief, they spiritually connect us to the mystery of Christ and Him crucified! Consider the nature of Baptism. In and through the waters of Baptism, we pass with Christ through His suffering and death into His glorious resurrection (Romans 6:1-4). Consider the nature of the Lord's Supper. Each time we partake of Christ's true body and blood, we proclaim His death until He comes again (1 Corinthians 11:26). Thus, the fruits of the cross are the essential ingredients of the Sacraments, for from Christ's pierced and riven side flowed blood and water (John 19:34).

In the Gospel of John, Christ likens Himself to a Door (John 10:7). This is a fitting image upon which to conclude our discussion. The very cross itself provides the entranceway to immortality as we pass through our own deaths into resurrection life. The death of Christ upon the cross operates both as the portal into eternal life, as well as the very means by which we are transported. And each time we gaze upon the crucifix, we are confronted with the morbid dilemma of our own sins, and the eternal remedy in Christ Jesus, our Lord. I pray this short explanation provides you with some clarity regarding our decision to display a crucifix in our sanctuary.

In Christ,
Pastor Jeremy H. Mills
Epiphany Lutheran, Westfield, IN