

Ask Fr James

How did the church arrive at having the cross and the body (corpus) on the cross?

The Bible tells us that Jesus was crucified on the cross and after the crucifixion, the dead Christ was taken down from the cross and wrapped in the Shroud and Joseph of Arimathea and some friends buried him in a tomb hewed from a rock (Mark 15:46; John 19:38-42). After his resurrection and ascension, the early Christians hesitated to depict the cross in worship because of discomfiture with Christ's gruesome and shameful death and instead, they alluded to the cross under a variety of other symbols like the fish or the bread. However, two events will lead to the re-emergence of the cross and bring it to the fore as the centrality of Christian life. First, the relic of the true cross was discovered and second, the shroud, the cloth in which the body of Jesus was wrapped and buried was also discovered.

After the legendary discovery of the relic of the true cross by Helena in 312 and the accompanying miracles, the power of the cross and its veneration became widespread and the cross was later adopted by Emperor Constantine and his successors as the "chi-rho" symbol shield for the Roman empire. The relic of the True Cross opened the spirituality of the cult of the cross and led to its widespread veneration. The wood-of-the-cross was believed to possess special powers because of the Holy Blood that flowed upon it and from it and people began to touch and sign themselves with the Holy Cross (*signum crucis*) and from here on, representations of the cross began to emerge in a variety of physical forms; changing from a branch of a tree (*interpreted from the Tree in Paradise; the Tree of Life spoken of in Genesis 2:9 and 3:24*) and then to wooden form and later the cross took material form, carved in gold or in bronze. Today we are back to wooden cross.

Later, when the shroud with which Jesus was buried was also discovered, the belief in Jesus became more widespread. The Shroud made its first recorded appearance in 1353 in Lirey, France and it was brought to the Holy Land and to Constantinople and then eventually to the Vatican and it was archived in Turin, Italy. The Shroud of Turin is impregnated with the image of Christ as he was laid in the fresh-made tomb lent by Joseph of Arimathea over 2000 years ago.

Msgr. Giulo Ricci, a Vatican archivist, studied the shroud of Turin and constructed a life-scale replica of the crucifix and corpus, showing Jesus as he would have looked according to the Shroud. The product of Msgr. Ricci's scholarship is gruesome to see. The head is downcast; the body raked with cuts, sweats-lick and bloody. He depicted that the Christ is short, 5'4" or 5", no more. Originally it was thought that he was tall, 5'10" or better. Christ's hair is depicted as long and, he wears a beard, as most Semitic men did. (*see next Sunday's bulletin for the theology behind having the Body on the cross*).

You may email/send your faith questions to Fr. James and he will answer them in our Sunday Bulletins.