

Ask Fr James
Why do we Catholics have the Body (corpus) of Jesus on the wooden Cross?

A distinctive symbol of every Catholic Church is the huge Cross with the Body of Jesus on it (crucifix). The death of Christ is at the heart of the Gospels because he saved the world from on top of the cross. Catholics put the Body on the Crucifix so we can see Christ's true love for us. The Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for you... Take and eat; do this in remembrance of me... Take and drink my blood in remembrance of me... (Luke 22:19ff) is what the body on the Cross reminds us of. In the Sacrament of the Altar, two things are signified, viz. Christ's true body and Christ's mystical body. The *corpus Christi verum*, that is to say, the historical body of Christ crucified for us is a pointer to the mystical body that we celebrate and receive in the Holy Eucharist.

This theology of the body on the cross is so inextricably bound to the Eucharist. The Body on the wood of the cross on which Christ hung is impregnated with his blood and the Eucharist presents Christ and his wounds. Throughout its history, the Church has established sensible signs that would help the faithful to elevate their souls to God. The Catholic Church interprets Jesus' invitation to Thomas; "come, put your hands in the wounds of my hands and side..." (John 20: 24-29) as also an invitation to all of us to come touch his hands and his side and experience the Real Presence of the Body of Christ. When we hold the crucifix, as when we pray the Rosary or touch the crucifix, we also touch his body and his wounds as Thomas did.

During the celebration of the Holy Mass, it is the rule that on the altar or close to the altar, there is to be a cross with a figure of Christ crucified and the cross adorned with a figure of Christ crucified. Pope, Benedict XVI advocated the use of a sizable crucifix upon the altar as a means of focusing priest and faithful on the central mystery of redemption made present at Mass and symbolized by the crucifix and this practice has been continued by Pope Francis.

A sizable crucifix with the body on the cross is also carried in procession and placed next to the altar to serve as the altar cross. The cross with the image of Christ crucified is a reminder of Christ's paschal mystery. The Elevation of the Host signals the completion of transubstantiation just as the elevation of Christ on the Cross at the crucifixion signals Christ's sacrifice and the Cross' transition to a venerated object. Looking at Christ on the cross joins our historical anamnesis with the mystical body that we celebrate at Mass by transubstantiation. The doctrine of the Real Presence, in Catholic theology, is the belief that Jesus Christ is truly present, body and blood, in the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

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