

The Cross and The Lamb



During Lent, many people choose to wear crosses, crucifixes, or holy medals. These often serve as physical reminders of what one has promised to do or what one has given up as the Church prepares for the Passion and Death of Jesus. The cross is an important symbol to Christians throughout the world, but there are other symbols of Jesus as well. In fact, before the 5th century, Christians avoided use of the cross due to the disgrace associated with crucifixion, a heinous form of death. Instead, Jesus was primarily represented as a lamb. How did Jesus get to be associated with a lamb? There are many references in the New Testament, including thirty in the book of Revelation alone, but in order to understand the connection, we must look to the Old Testament story of Moses in Egypt.

The Jewish feast of Passover reminds us of how God rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt by killing the firstborn Egyptians and “passing over” the homes of the Israelites. This was the last of ten plagues God used to convince the pharaoh to release His chosen people. To protect the firstborn sons of their families, the Israelites were told to sacrifice an unblemished lamb and smear the blood on the doorposts of their houses. This was a signal to the angel of death to “pass over” and spare the firstborn of God’s people. For Christians, Jesus is both the sacrificed firstborn Son as well as the unblemished or sinless lamb who gives His blood and His life to save His people from the slavery of sin and death.

In the 5th century we start seeing the use of the crucifix, a cross with a corpus or body. Images of the crucifix in the Middle Ages tended to depict Jesus with his eyes open and no trace of suffering to reflect the Resurrection. By the 13th century, Christ’s body was often depicted as twisted and bleeding to emphasize his humanity, and by this time the crucifix became established as an altar centerpiece in most churches. During the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, the crucifix was banned as a form of idolatry. Today, the crucifix is primarily used in Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox Churches.

While an empty cross can represent Jesus’ resurrection, Catholics understand the importance of remembering the suffering and death that took place on the cross before the resurrection. Both the crucifix and the lamb help us to remember the suffering that God endured for us and for our salvation.