

Why We Do What We Do

Why do I see a crucifix in Catholic churches but only a cross in other Christian churches. For us the person on the cross is the focus, not just the cross. The body (corpus) of Christ on the cross is the full reminder of His sacrifice and our salvation. It is Christ's dying on the cross, not solely the cross. The word crucifix comes from the word crucifixion, and reminds us also of the painful manner of His death. The death of Christ on the cross is historically one moment in time. By earth/human time, Christ died on the cross 2,000 years ago. For God all is now. "I am who am." A thousand years for us is the same moment for God. For God, the cross is an ongoing reality. Christ is continually saving us at this moment as He did the apostles and those who have gone before us. The timelessness of Heaven says Christ died historically 2,000 years ago, but in the eyes of God that work of salvation and redemption continues till the end of time. Thus we stand at the cross with Mary and John. We are with Peter and John on Easter Sunday morning running to see the empty tomb. We are in the Upper Room when Christ appears and we see His Risen Body. Other Christians associate crucifixes with statues and consider them to be a form of idolatry. The believe Catholics worship statues. We don't. They are visual reminders of spiritual people, events, and devotions. We do not "worship" pictures of loved ones? They help us remember. And remind us that people in Heaven are still alive and still very close to us. We are visual people and need visual reminders. Statues and other religious articles started in a time when very few people could read or write. They learned spiritual things through the use of physical educational and prayer tools. Statues and crucifixes helped give people a mental picture of past events and people. These helped people to learn and to know how to pray and inspired their imagination to raise their thoughts to Heaven and to thoughts of Christ. By the time of Martin Luther (early 1500's) some uninformed, well intentioned church members were confused and there were isolated cases of "worshipping" statues. The practice of selling indulgences (which included purchasing of certain relics) added to this confusion. Never was this official church teaching or authorized activity. The influence of greed and people wanting concrete certainty about their salvation led to the abuses. Luther, as part of his "95 Theses" (1517), attacked the abuses and the spiritual practices of the day calling them idolatry. The resulting protestant reformation included the removal of all statues and crucifixes. Some beautiful churches were destroyed as all carvings, artwork, and decorations were smashed and burned. Some of the original protestant denominations and their off shoots (branches) still have very plain churches. Almost nothing "saying" "This is a Church." Art and music raise our eyes and our spirits. They help us to "enter into" a spiritual frame of mind by the use of the imagination and the senses. They help us to pray, but ultimately prayer is about joining our hearts to God and allowing Him to capture our imagination and transform our concepts of God and ourselves.

