

Locking the Imagination: The Significance of Placing the Body of Christ on the Cross

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Abstract

Crosses with or without the body (*corpus*) of Christ cannot be considered interchangeable. In this lecture, I address the question of the dearth of evidence for early Christian images of the crucified Christ as opposed to bare crosses. The gap of a few centuries in the evidence cannot simply be brushed aside as the result of a persecuted community that could not express itself freely, nor considered the haphazard outcome of time's devastation. The tension between inhabited and empty crosses comes to the fore in the preaching of Ambrose and Jerome. Witnessing to the prevalence of empty crosses, they emphasize that true piety consisted in imagining Christ's bodily presence. Only a few early surviving gemstones of the crucifix reflect a special use of the image with the body in contexts of piety and private display, but it was not until a canon of the Council in Trullo (697) that a requirement for the presence of Christ's body was set down explicitly as church law. I argue that this (controversial) measure was taken in order to bring back the focus of the cross from imperial ownership to a meditation about Christ's suffering and saving work, as expressed in Galatians 3:1. I further suggest that the absence of the body of Christ from the early repertoire may be due to the fact that the crucifixion was represented live to early Christian audiences, and that we therefore have no monumental material remains that attest to these devotional and catechetical practices. The prevalence of Christ's bodily presence in artistic works was therefore gradual. It went hand in hand with changed perceptions about what was appropriate to represent and where and how. Like other aspects of the faith, it both reflected changing tastes and customs more broadly in society and theological reflections about the divine nature of Christ and the use of images.