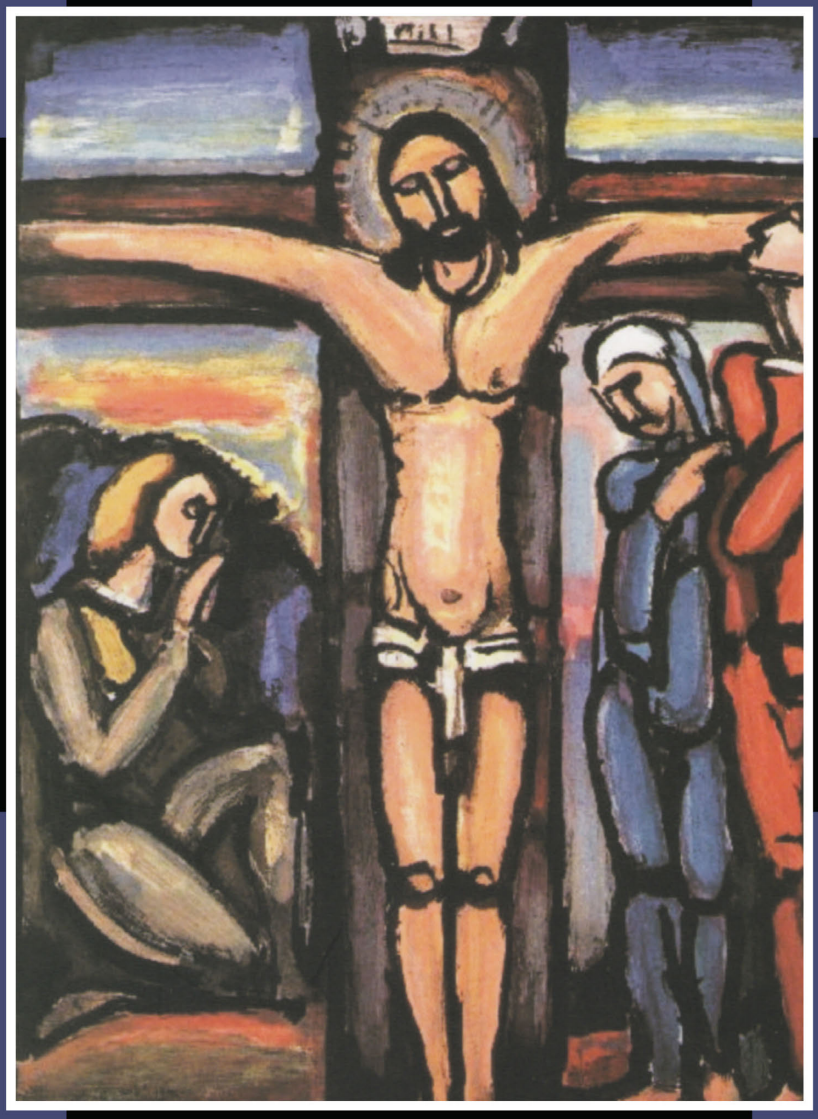
THE PASSION IN ART

An **Ashgate** Book



Richard Harries

ASHGATE STUDIES IN
THEOLOGY, IMAGINATION AND THE ARTS

THE PASSION IN ART

Jesus was not depicted on the cross until the early fifth century. Since then this scene has been painted or carved in sharply differing ways.

With the aid of over thirty full-page plates, *The Passion in Art* explores the historical contexts and theologies that led to such differing depictions. Because the first Christians saw the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus as different aspects of a unified victory over sin and death, scenes of the Passion are juxtaposed with some of the Resurrection, which again are highly varied in what they do and do not show.

This is the first book to consider the Passion as portrayed in the whole sweep of Christian history. Each picture is considered both from the point of view of its context and its theological standpoint.

Spanning the centuries, the images reproduced and discussed include: scenes from the Passion of Christ in the Catacombs of Domitilla, mosaics in Ravenna, the Rabbula Crucifixion and Resurrection, the Crucifixion Plaque from Metz, the Gero Crucifix, Cimabue's Crucifix, Giotto's *Noli me Tangere*, Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection*, the Isenheim altarpiece, Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus*, Rembrandt's *Christ on the Cross*, Chagall's *White Crucifixion*, contemporary paintings by Stanley Spencer, Graham Sutherland, Nicholas Mynheer, and many more works of great acclaim.

For Jo
who has seen many of these works
with me.

THE PASSION IN ART

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Bishop of Oxford

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Introduction

The focus of this book is the Crucifixion of Christ from its earliest depiction in Christian art through to our own time. Each age has its own insights into the meaning of Christ's Passion, which is reflected in its art. I will be exploring that art and the Christian understanding which is reflected in it.

In order to give the book as sharp a focus as possible and keep it to a reasonable length I have not dealt at all with other pictures in the Passion cycle, such as the Arrest, the Betrayal by Judas with a kiss, the Flagellation, the Crowning with Thorns, the Carrying of the Cross, the Deposition, Lamentation and Entombment. Nor have I considered the Stations of the Cross, which developed from the fourteenth century onwards under Franciscan influence and which still today forms an important devotion in many churches. Each of the scenes in the Passion cycle has undergone its own development. But I have wanted to concentrate on the changes in a single image, that of Christ crucified. There is however one crucial exception.

The death of Christ cannot be considered apart from his Resurrection. For it is in the light of the Resurrection that the Cross is revealed as a victory. The Crucifixion of Jesus is not just one more example of human cruelty and tragedy. From a Christian standpoint it is God's victory over evil. But it was only in the light of the Resurrection that the first Christians were enabled to see this. The result is that in the earliest Christian art, as this book tries to show, the Cross and the Resurrection are seen in a unified manner as two aspects of one triumph. In particular I am concerned with the *Anastasis* (Greek for 'Resurrection'), the authorised image of the Orthodox Church for symbolically depicting Christ's victory over death. I have also used some pictures of the Resurrection appearances of Christ, when they first appear in the tradition or develop in a particular way. I have not tried to show how these have changed over the years (except in the case of the Anastasis) but have interspersed them with images of the Crucifixion as a constant reminder that Cross and Resurrection need to be seen together in art, as they are in theology. The book develops more or less chronologically with about one painting shown from each century. The exception is from the twentieth

century when I have shown a few more. Even here of course I have been highly selective, and dozens more could have been shown if there had been space.

I am indebted to a number of important works of scholarship, which have been referred to in the footnotes. Those who wish to pursue the themes in this book should follow up those references. I am grateful to Professor Henry Mayr-Harting for personal help on the art of the Ottonian period.

+Richard Oxon
Oxford
September 2003

Figure 1a: Cross with P (for PAX) and alpha and omega in the Catacomb of Commodilla.

Figure 1b: Epitaph to Antonia, originally in the Catacomb of Domitilla. The cross as an anchor with two fishes.

Symbols in the Catacombs

— Second and Third Centuries —

Under the streets of present-day Rome, but outside the walls of ancient Rome, lie the Catacombs, many of which can be visited. These are not, as was once thought, places where Christians huddled in fear from persecution. They are burial places, which Christians used from the first to the fifth centuries. On the walls and at the end of the tombs are paintings and inscriptions, which give us a vivid insight into how Christians saw their faith, especially how they approached death.[1] Many of the scenes are taken from the Old Testament but nearly all of them, both Old Testament and New Testament scenes, express the hope of deliverance or salvation. Common pictures are Daniel in the lion's den, the three boys in the burning fiery furnace, the raising of Lazarus and the crossing of the Dead Sea. There are no surviving depictions of either the Crucifixion or the Resurrection of Christ and it seems that these Christians preferred to point to these foundation events through the wider theme of deliverance expressed in a number of different ways, but especially through the story of Jonah and the Whale.[2]

About 45,000 inscriptions survive from this ancient Christian period. More than half of them are in Rome and 75 per cent of these are of a funeral nature. About 13 per cent of these have an unambiguously Christian symbol, almost all centering on the word 'peace' in either Latin or Greek. These inscriptions begin to appear from the second and third centuries. The dead were buried in a series of horizontal shafts, stacked one above another, as if in bunk beds of stone. In order that the families could recognise their own departed, depictions of familiar goods associated with the deceased and inscriptions would be carved at the end of the shaft when it had been closed up. Shown here is a symbol from the catacomb of Commodilla.[3] The Cross is depicted but the vertical stroke also forms a P, which in this case is the first letter of the Latin word 'Pax', or Peace. On either side of the Cross of Peace are inscribed Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. As we read in Revelation 1:8

> 'I am the Alpha and the Omega' says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

The family of the person who had died put their trust in God, the beginning and the end of all things who through the Cross of his Son has brought us peace now and for eternity.

Those Christians, at first a tiny community subject from time to time to fierce persecution, must have had something of the feel of a secret society. So it is understandable that they should often prefer signs and symbols to a more overt visual expression of their faith. In the catacomb of Domitilla there is this epitaph of Antonia.[4] Today it can be seen in the Basilica of Sts Mereus and Achilleus. The anchor was already a symbol of hope in the Roman world but it took on a deeper meaning for Christians. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, referring to the Christian hope of salvation through Christ, has these words: 'We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul' (Hebrews 6:19). This is no ordinary anchor however, for the crossbar has been transformed into a cross and, attached at either side to the hooks of the anchor, are two fishes. The fish was an important symbol in the early Church, first of all for Christ himself.

The letters of the Greek word for fish, ICTHUS, stand for 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour' (IESOUS CHRISTOS THEOU HUIOS SOTER), but because Jesus told his apostles to become 'fishers of men', Christians could also be referred to as 'fishes', swimming to salvation through the waters of baptism. The second-century theologian Tertullian wrote of baptism, 'But we small fishes, named after our great ICTHUS, Jesus Christ, are born in water and only by remaining in water can we live.' So here the family and friends of the loved one expressed their conviction that through our Christian faith we are fish being saved through the Cross of Christ, a sure anchor for our soul as we go through the waters of death.