

Pastoral Note on Crucifixes

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“but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,” (1 Corinthians 1:23).

Our sanctuary is a sacred space. Prayer, God’s Word, and the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are what make this a holy space because through these means Jesus Christ Himself visits us with His very presence. Indeed, we could worship in a field or a bar or a park, but I think all of us would admit that that is not the same.

A key aspect of what we value as Lutherans as we gather is Christ-centered worship. That is, worship that clearly teaches Christ and a space that aids in that end of proclaiming Christ. Theoretically, we could meet at a bar to conduct worship, but the neon signs advertising beer, the bottles of liquor on the shelves, and the television screens could distract from the overall message. Not that those things are themselves sinful, but in distracting from Christ and His cross, they become unhelpful to a worship setting.



To this end, our stained-glass windows, the banners hanging from the beams, and the front stone accent walls, the baptismal font at the front of the church, the altar, the colored cloths (paraments) on the lectern, pulpit, and altar—all of these seek to teach of Christ and matters of the faith. For example, I have led midweek series during Advent and Lent to highlight some of the themes that are in our stained glass, staring right at us the whole time.

Our sanctuary is sacred space. In addition to it being the place where we receive Word and Sacrament ministry, it’s the place where you have been week after week, month after month. For some of you reading this, you gathered here in shock after terrorists flew planes into the World Trade Centers on 9/11/2001. You gathered here to celebrate Christmas pageants with your children participating. You gathered here to celebrate baptisms and weddings. Your loved ones have lain in the front of this sanctuary as myself and pastors before me have conducted funerals. This space is special to many of you in ways I can only imagine. With that in mind, I try to be deliberate and respectful as I introduce changes in this sacred space. I want to introduce items that proclaim Christ and teach the people His Word.

A family offered to use memorial funds to purchase a processional crucifix to be placed in our chancel left of the pulpit. We have selected one from a catalog and will be dedicating it

this month or next. We appreciate the wonderful gift as it illustrates Christ's love for us as He laid down His life for us on the cross. This crucifix may also be used for special services such as on Easter or at a funeral, wherein the pastor may process in from the back of the narthex with a lay volunteer holding the crucifix. This is something I have discussed with the elders, and a motion was made and passed to purchase this processional crucifix.

For some of you, this may be the first time you have seen a crucifix in a Lutheran Church. Isn't that a Roman Catholic thing? An article on LCMS.org writes, "The history of Lutheranism demonstrates that the crucifix was a regular and routine feature of Lutheran worship and devotional life during Luther's lifetime and during the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy [*sic*]." This same article writes that throughout the history of Lutheranism, we have used art to focus our devotional thoughts. What better symbol can there be than an image of Christ dying for our sins? This same article concludes, "In Christian freedom, we use either the crucifix or an empty cross and should not judge or condemn one another for using either nor not using either symbol of our Lord's sacrifice for our sins" This full article may be read by visiting <https://www.lcms.org/about/beliefs/faqs/worship-and-congregational-life#crucifixes>

When Luther was exiled from Wittenberg, a radical Reformer named Karlstadt made many changes in Wittenberg. One such change was removing all images from churches: smashing stained glass windows, tearing down statues, and removing crucifixes. When Luther returned, he chose to reinstate the things Karlstadt took down including crucifixes. Luther argued that these things, as long as they themselves are not worshipped, do no harm and are useful as memorials (Luther's Works, American Edition, Volume 40, pages 88, 91, 96). When treating the 1st Commandment part of which includes not making graven images or bowing down to them, Luther explained that even Moses made graven images such as a bronze serpent or angels over the ark of the covenant, the key issue was when people started worshipping these images, they were destroyed such as when King Hezekiah destroyed the bronze serpent when they made it into an idol (2 Kings 18:4). My prayer is that by adding the processional cross to the sanctuary, we will remember our Lord who has suffered for our sins, died on the cross, and rose again on the third day to forgive us of our trespasses.