



OFFICE FOR THE LITURGICAL CELEBRATIONS  
OF THE SUPREME PONTIFF

*The Crucifix at the Center of the Altar*



The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* asks the question: “What is the liturgy?” and answers:

The liturgy is the celebration of the mystery of Christ and in particular his paschal mystery. Through the exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ, the liturgy manifests in signs and brings about the sanctification of humankind. The public worship which is due to God is offered by the Mystical Body of Christ, that is, by its head and by its members. (n. 218)

From this definition, one understands that Christ the Eternal High Priest and the Paschal Mystery of his Passion, Death and Resurrection are at the center of the liturgical action of the Church. The liturgy must be the celebrated transparency of this theological truth. For many centuries, the sign chosen by the Church to orient the heart and the body during the liturgy has been the depiction of the Crucified Jesus.

The centrality of the crucifix in the celebration of divine worship was more evident in the past, when the normative custom was that both priests and faithful would turn and face the crucifix during the eucharistic celebration. The cross was placed in the center above the altar, which in turn was attached to the wall, according to the norm. For the present custom of celebrating the Eucharist “facing the people,” often the crucifix is located to the side of the altar, thus losing its central position.



Then-theologian and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger many times had underscored that, even during the celebration “facing the people,” the crucifix should maintain its central position, and that it would be impossible to think that the depiction of the Crucified Lord – which expresses his Sacrifice and therefore the most important significance of the Eucharist – could be in some way a source of disturbance. Having become Pope, **Benedict XVI**, in the preface to the first volume of his *Gesammelte Schriften*, said that he was happy about the fact that the proposal he had advanced in his celebrated essay, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, was making headway. That proposal consisted in the suggestion that: “Where a direct common turning toward the east is not possible, the cross can serve as the interior ‘east’ of faith. It should stand in the middle of the altar and be the common point of focus for both priest and praying community.”<sup>1</sup>



The crucifix at the center of the altar recalls so many splendid meanings of the Sacred Liturgy, which can be summarized by referring to paragraph 618 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, a passage which concludes with a beautiful citation from St. Rose of Lima:

The cross is the unique sacrifice of Christ, the “one mediator between God and men” (1 Tim 2:5). But because in his incarnate divine person he has in some

way united himself to every man, “the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery” is offered to all men (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22). He calls his disciples to “take up [their] cross and follow [him]” (Mt 16:24), for “Christ also suffered for [us], leaving [us] an example so that [we] should follow in his steps” (1 Pt 2:21). In fact, Jesus desires to associate with his redeeming sacrifice those who were to be its first beneficiaries (cf. Mk 10:39; Jn 21:18-19; Col 1:24). This is achieved supremely in the case of his mother, who was associated more intimately than any other person in the mystery of his redemptive suffering (cf. Lk 2:35). “Apart from the cross, there is no other ladder by which we may get to heaven” (St. Rose of Lima, in P. Hansen, *Vita Mirabilis* [Louvain, 1668]).



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<sup>1</sup>*The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 83.

