

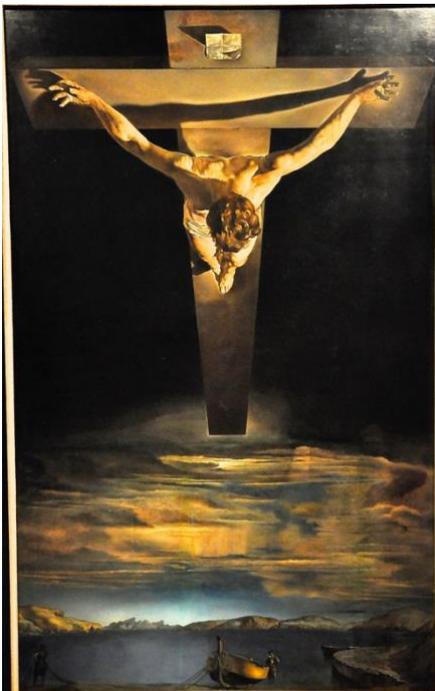
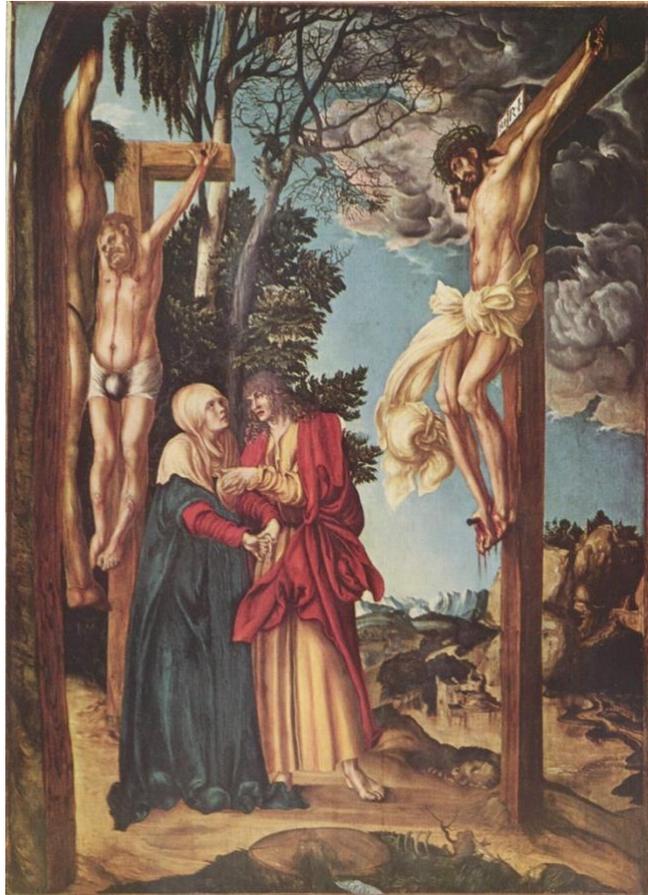
The Shape of the Cross

Homily for Good Friday 2021 at St. Paul Cathedral, Yakima Washington, USA

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

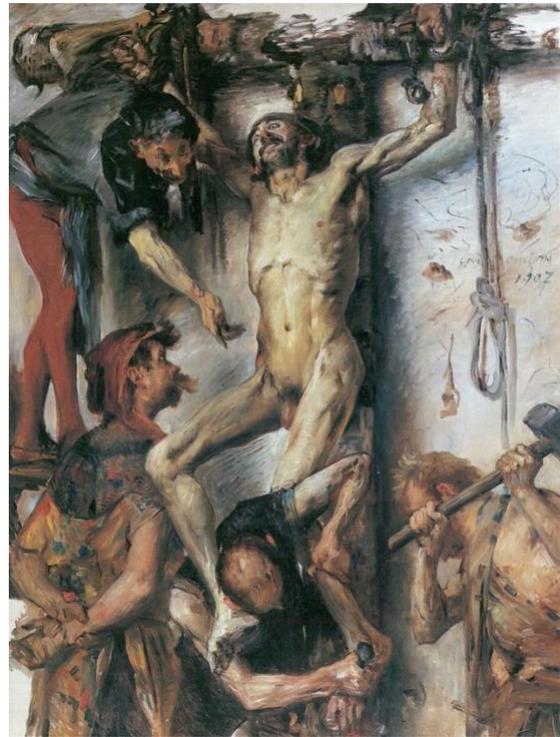
Peace with you! What is the shape of the cross? In a few minutes we will venerate the cross here in the Cathedral tied to the COVID-19 protocols. But in truth, the cross we often must venerate is the cross that looms tall in our lives. This might be especially true this year as we grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic.

What is the shape of the cross? Over the years I have had the opportunity to see a variety of paintings depicting the crucifixion of Christ. I can reflect back on seeing the crucifixion scene from 1505 now displayed in Munich's Alte Pinakothek by Lucas Cranach the Elder. The scene is from the ground level looking up with the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. John together pondering the event. It is as though by looking up, we are looking beyond the horrific scene and looking up to the rising of Christ in the resurrection.

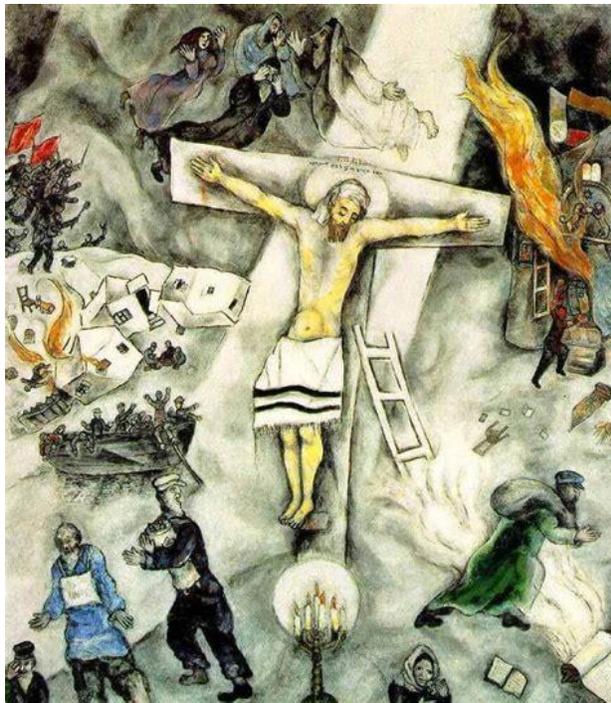


Almost the opposite is the depiction of the crucifixion by Salvador Dalí completed in 1951. It is based on a famous pen sketch by sixteenth century Saint John of the Cross that I once saw while reading his poetry. Opposite from Cranach, Dalí paints the scene as if we were looking down perhaps in the way God the Father looks down upon the horrific and torturous death of his son. Anticipating the emotional social distancing and isolation so prominent in the 20th century, Salvador Dalí shows Christ being crucified atop the surrealistic landscape completely alone.

Regensburg's Ostdeutsche Gallerie houses a haunting crucifixion scene done in 1907 by Lovis Corinth. With a tortuous face screwed upward, Corinth seems to anticipate how George Weigel names the twentieth century "the bloody century" in his biography of Pope Saint John Paul II.



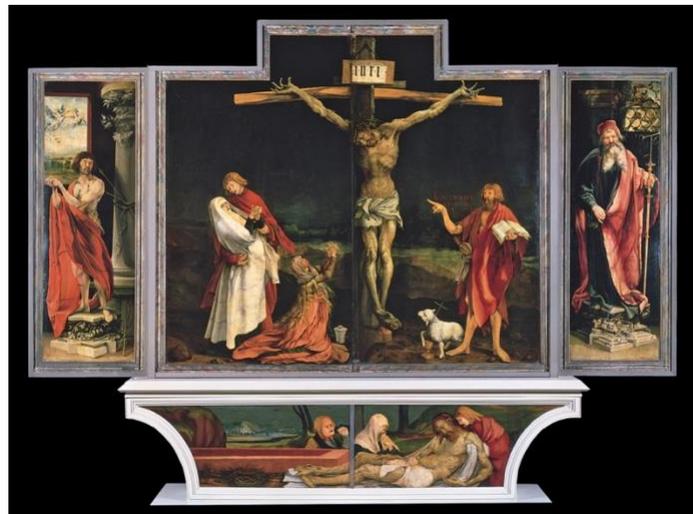
Somewhat related would be the painter-in-glass artist Marc Chagall. His 1939 work is housed in Chicago's Art Institute where I and many of our seminarians have seen it. On the eve of the Second World War and the horror of the murder of some seven million Jews, Chagall's Christ has



a blue and white loincloth reminiscent of the Jewish prayer shawl. How easy it is for us to forget that Jesus is a Jew. So were his supporters. So were many of his detractors. Marc Chagall's powerful work anticipates a crucifixion yet to come.

Perhaps most germane to our COVID-19 pandemic is the eerie depiction of the crucifixion by Matthias Grünewald in 1515. Housed at the Musée d'Unterlinden in Colmar France, the painting depicts the crucified Christ with a body marked with the smallpox

infection. The painting is displayed just a stone's throw from the actual place where people who were dying of smallpox could gaze upon the painting and know that Christ also suffered and died in the very same way.



The variety of crucifixions suggest that each of us face a particular cross in our personal lives. What are we to make of the shape of our cross? In a video clip for Father Robert Spitzer's "Credible Catholic" series, Joni Eareckson tells

the story of becoming paraplegic after a tragic diving accident where she broke her neck. She said, "I even got mad at God." She goes on to note that God is the one "...who writes suffering into the script of our lives."

What got Joni Eareckson through her paraplegic struggles and, later, her struggles with cancer? She notes what got her through were ten little words. "God permits what he hates to accomplish what he loves." She goes on to note that "Even at the cross, God permitted what he hated – that agonizing death of his own precious son." Why? "Salvation of sinners."

Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani. We heard these words in the Gospel of Mark this last Passion Sunday. They come from the beginning of Psalm 22. Most likely this is the psalm Jesus prayed as he died on the cross. But note this. Reading down and praying the actual psalm we discover that when we pray this psalm, we pray words of praise for a God who is holy even if our enemies are torturers. But not God. God "...has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; he has not hidden his face from him but has heard. Him, when he cried out to him."

None of us likes to suffer, as Joni Eareckson noted and none of us wants to take on suffering when it comes. On this side of the grave, it feels like abandonment. But from the viewpoint of God, suffering becomes a pathway for our salvation. "God permits what he hates to accomplish what he loves."

Lucas Cranach the Elder, John of the Cross. Salvador Dali. Lovis Corinth. Marc Chagall. Matthias Grünewald. Each saw the shape of the crucifixion differently. Each sought to expose the power of the cross in a unique way. Today as we reverence the cross of Christ, may we reverence the salvation that the crucifixion brings to our lives, to the lives of our neighbors, and to the suffering humanity around the world. Peace be with you!

Art (in order of appearance):

"The Lamentation of Christ." 1503. Lucas Cranach the Elder, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

"Christ of Saint John of the Cross." 1951. Salvador Dalí, Fair Use for Educational Purposes.

"Das große Martyrium." 1907. Lovis Corinth, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

"White Crucifixion." 1938. Marc Chagall. Fair Use for Educational Purposes.

"The Isenheim Altarpiece." 1509-1515. Mathias Grünewald, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.