

Ground is level at foot of the cross

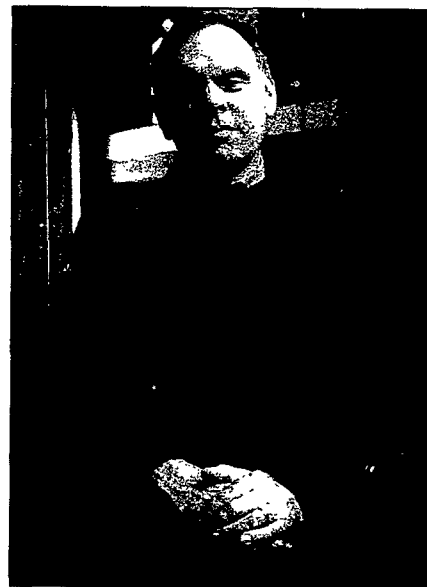
*In the cross of Christ I glory,
Tow'ring o'er the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.*
—John Bowering, 1792-1872

Arnold Conrad and I used to have deep theological discussions. He lived two doors from me on Moyer Avenue in Des Moines, Iowa. We were in elementary school, but we defended our faith — his Roman Catholic, mine Protestant — with passion and depth. We had long conversations and honed our debating skills. Arnie's mom died last year, and I had occasion to call him. He lives on the West Coast. I have not seen him in more than 40 years. He's still Catholic and I Protestant. Neither of us has been successful in converting the other.

But, why bother? Jesus died for us both. As the old preachers said, "The ground is level at the foot of the cross." Nobody can contemplate the cross without being converted. It's not that I was right and he was not. I needed to see the cross in his eyes and he in mine. We needed each other to help us understand what was going on in our own heart.

How we love the cross! We are in love with love, and here is the best love of all. We yearn for the love found here and thirst for it. Whether the cross is empty, as were the ones in the Baptist churches where I grew up, or bears the body of Christ, it invites us into the mystery of love untamed by our dogmas, beyond words.

The cross of Christ is bigger than our representations of it. The crosses in my churches were empty, because Christ is already raised from the dead. Let's live in the Resurrection. Yes! Most readers of the *Catholic Courier* have a crucifix in their church, because Christ suffers



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

The Rev. Richard Myers.

with all the nameless little ones crushed beneath the boots of power, of war and its stepchildren — famine, disease, post-traumatic stress. Don't we wound him by thought, word and deed? Yes!

It's impossible for anyone or any church to contain it all. The Mel Gibson film ("The Passion of the Christ") cannot do it. Some people have experienced the love of Christ more powerfully than ever before in this film. Others find that its violence misses the essence of Jesus. Why did he die? Is it enough to say, "He died for me" in this oh-so-individualistic society?

An empty cross and the crucifix — each declares part of the mystery. So, in this season all of us stand beneath the cross of Jesus, and all of us stand by the empty tomb. As George McLeod prayed, "Eternal Carpenter, who with wood and nails fashioned our salvation, we come unfinished to your workbench."

It's not for the conversion of others, but for our conversion. We are unfinished. The message of the cross invites us on the Way of the Cross. As Jesus was completely out of step with his times, so we who love him will find ourselves out of step with our own. It is not simply for heaven that the work of Christ prepares us, it is for the living of heaven on earth. It is for the new creation.

So you and I together, all who love Jesus, must be one body in him. We must live out the unity of his spirit. We must declare to the world his radical love by our radical love for one another. We must recognize him in the poor. Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Recently, I heard a local radio personality arguing that the subsidized housing on the Genesee River should be torn down and developed for wealthy people. He said that it should go to the "givers" not to the "takers." This society that slices and dices people, sets us against one another, plays throw-away games with people, needs the radical image of a community who stands together on the level ground at the foot of the cross. Our salvation is our commission.

We are one in the spirit. That's all

there is to it. Arnold and I love the same Lord, and the same Lord loves us. The empty cross needs the crucifix. Pulpit and Eucharist complement one another.



The people of the pulpit and the people of the Eucharist come together in the Greater Rochester Community of Churches. And, though we cannot share some forms of worship with one another, we find vital ways to pray. When our worship group plans healing services for Monroe County jail, they discover that the Risen Christ dissolves the walls that have divided us as believers. We are thankful for signs of our unity like the GRCC. We are thankful for this season that empties us and fills us again.

Let us offer blessing on all the beloved of Christ, no matter what denominational label they carry. We stand before the mystery of the cross, and we listen again with disbelief to the message of Christ who showed the disciples his hands and side, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21).

The Rev. Richard Myers is pastor of Rochester's Immanuel Baptist Church and president of the Greater Rochester Community of Churches.

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